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by

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**Superintendent Perspectives of Public School Accountability and Local  
Control of Schools**

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**Superintendent Perspectives of Public School Accountability and Local  
Control of Schools**

**by**

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**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

*To my parents,*

*Efren Peña*

*and*

*Rosa Peña*

*who modeled love and compassion.*

*You showed me that being selfless is a true virtue.*

*Dad, I am grateful for your kindness, your wisdom, and your guidance.*

*Thank you for being by my side, for believing in me, and always challenging me*

*to be more.*

*Mom, I am grateful for your intellect, your courage, and your love.*

*Thank you for teaching me the value of kindness, for modeling for me the attribute of perseverance, and for showing me that compassion has the power to heal all wounds.*

*Thank you for your guidance in navigating life.*

*You've been my beacon of faith.*

*This is for you.*

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# **Superintendent Perspectives of Public School Accountability and Local Control of Schools**

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The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) transferred flexibility for accountability rules to states to control following the national accountability era of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The interdependent relationships of structural linkages between state and local school entities need examination for understanding how best to align the systemic linkages for accountability based on the measures of performance. The purpose of the study was to explore and understand school district leaders' perspectives about school accountability in Texas based on the state's recent shift towards a shared accountability system. This phenomenological study was explored through discussions with three superintendents and three deputy superintendents. The following three research question guided the study: (a) What are perspectives of district leaders within the shift from a state-imposed accountability system to shared accountability in Texas? (b) How would district leaders of urban districts define the movement toward local control? (c) How do school leaders envision a plan of action for shared accountability? The researcher utilized a purposeful sampling strategy to select three urban school districts. The snowball sampling was used to gain participants. All interviews were

semi-structured, tape-recorded, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The perspectives and lived experiences of the participants led the narrative in supporting the creation of three themes. The three themes that evolved through the data relating to how the six district leaders perceive, experience and understand the shift in the accountability system, impact on student performance, effect on policy and governance, and desired shift in curriculum and instruction. Implications for practice evolving from this study extend to researchers, superintendents, trustees, and district stakeholders. Recommendations for further research include: (a) expanding the target population to include a more diverse superintendent demographic and differing types of school districts; (b) examining the interactivity between the state and district leaders to influence policymaking in generating greater shared accountability, responsibility, and autonomy in school districts; and (c) investigating how superintendents understand developing systemic capacity to provide quality resources and effectively organize their school districts as they experience shifts in school accountability system across the multiple channels and among stakeholders. Additional recommendations and implications appear in Chapter 5.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study**

### **Introduction**

Over the past century, the U.S. public school system has implemented reform strategies for ensuring equitable education opportunities are provided to all students (O'Day, Smith, & Education Policy Center at American Institutes for Research, 2016). Public policy plays an important part in participating in consistent dialogue between school districts, states, and the federal government by amending to outdated platforms and agendas (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2004). Stakeholders worked toward forming a thorough accountability system. The accountability movement began with conversation among federal, state, and local key players that led to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) implemented under President George W. Bush. Recently, the pendulum shifted from the NCLB system of accountability to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 which was enacted under President Barack Obama (2015). Under ESSA, states regained considerable flexibility and authority for measuring student achievement in public K-12 education that had been removed from state and local control by NCLB (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017).

#### **The Accountability Era of NCLB from 2002 to 2015**

With the development of state and federal accountability systems under NCLB (2002), school districts became accountable for the delivery of educational outcomes. This was a powerful move, because prior to 2002, public education providers were solely evaluated on offering educational services. NCLB regulated districts at large through a system of federally created checks and balances by focusing on student participation or

attendance and student academic achievement or performance on standardized measurements. NCLB required states to submit their accountability plans that were based on long-term and interim goals to the federal government, and federal regulators tended to focus on failure to achieve targets and on implementing sanctions (Taylor, Stecher, O'Day, Naftel, & Carlson Le Floch, 2010). NCLB was endorsed as ensuring rigorous educational learning environments for all students by focusing on projected academic performance outcomes. NCLB was a focused effort to improve the overall outcomes of all students by utilizing a national accountability system which required the standardized assessment of students and reviewed their academic progress at the end of each school year (Sherman, 2008).

Unfortunately, NCLB's accountability metrics, though progressive, did not lead to the desired outcomes for student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). As a result, school leadership personnel and school boards faced increased levels of scrutiny from both state and federal agencies. Essentially, NCLB's regulation processes exposed the disparities within the nation's education system and uncovered achievement gaps between segments of student populations. The data revealed by NCLB highlighted the academic areas in which students had made academic progress but also guided education agencies to direct efforts toward academic areas in need of additional support by educators. The act created a national dialogue which emphasized the need for revision of current educational practices to ensure that regardless of race, income, zip code, disability, home language, or background, students were offered an equitable and sound educational opportunity (Sherman, 2008). Because the intent of NCLB and the reality of

its implementation in state accountability systems did not meet the needs of the most vulnerable student groups, (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016), stakeholders had discussions to bridge the apparent shortcomings of NCLB. At the end of 2015, ESSA became law.

### **The Return of Accountability Authority to the States Through ESSA**

ESSA was signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015, as an opportunity to transform the nation's schools. ESSA was bipartisan as the nation's education law and represented a longstanding, national commitment to equal opportunity for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As a result of the efforts of educators, communities, parents, and students across the country, ESSA (2015) transferred the national accountability rules of NCLB back to the states to control. "ESSA marks an important move toward a more holistic approach to accountability by encouraging multiple measures of school and student success" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016, p. 1). The adoption of ESSA, provided states with more autonomy and increased flexibility in the creation of rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans for closing achievement gaps, increasing equity, improving the quality of instruction, and increasing outcomes for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The act provided state leaders with the challenging responsibility of designing systems to address the enduring inequalities in student learning opportunities and outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016).

However, ESSA offered states more freedom than NCLB had to establish accountability systems for districts. Without an established federally created and implemented system of checks and balances to enforce policy, states might lack the



skills, ability, and manpower to monitor and provide guidance to school districts (Weiss & McGuinn, 2017). According to Weiss and McGuinn (2017), state education agencies (SEA) were tasked to assess their areas of strength and weakness in offering guidelines and support to school districts as a result of ESSA. Thus, SEAs have acquired shared accountability for leading the efforts to close the nation's longstanding racial and socioeconomic status (SES) achievement gaps within their states.

In response to the requirements set forth by ESSA, Texas, home to 1,031 school districts, submitted the initial plan to federal agencies that included its shared accountability guidelines. Following the state legislature's passage of House Bill 2804, at the conclusion of the 2016-2017 school year, Texas' SEA, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), developed a shared accountability system of A to F (A-F) grades. The TEA formally submitted it to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) as the state's ESSA consolidated plan on September 25, 2017. After reviewing the USDE's feedback on December 21, 2017, and revising the state plan, the final Texas ESSA plan was submitted on March 6, 2018, as a unique opportunity to chart a path for shifting key decisions related to accountability, school improvement, teacher quality, and funding back to the state and local level (TEA, 2018). The Texas A-F system was to be used as a non-negotiable guide and fully implemented by school leaders for the 2017-2018 school year. Based on four domains of evaluation, the TEA was tasked to issue letter grades of A, B, C, D or F to public schools and districts in the state (TEA, 2018). These domains and their pieces are discussed with detail in the literature review found in Chapter 2.

Researchers have indicated the imperative of focused goals for student achievement and alignment of the school board, superintendent, central office staff, and site leadership (MacIver & Farley, 2003; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Prompting and ensuring the alignment of stakeholders was for expanding children's educational opportunities and improving students' outcomes under ESSA (USDE, 2015). ESSA offered the flexibility for states to attain shared accountability between regulatory SEAs and local public school districts. ESSA promoted transparency, reflective thinking, collaboration of best practices, and demographic awareness and responsiveness.

### **Problem Statement**

There is consensus in the literature regarding the imperative for superintendents and board leaders to focus on student achievement as a necessary component to school districts' academic success (ECRA Group, 2010). The board relies on the leadership of the superintendent to translate multiple public, legal, and fiscal pressures into a coherent, student-focused mission. The superintendent relies on the support of the board to carry out programmatic initiatives. The growing body of literature dealing with shared accountability and its frameworks served as background for the study (Bathgate, Colvin, & Silva, 2011). School districts have been challenged to find the balance between centralized and decentralized controls while ensuring students of all backgrounds are equitably educated. Scholars previously investigated the characteristics of effective schools, but research relating specifically to how districts' top leaders make meaning of student achievement in holistic school district performance was unavailable at the time of this investigation (Means, Padilla, Gallagher, & SRI International, 2010).

Following the implementation of ESSA, the perspectives of district superintendents and deputy superintendents about their experiences in adopting and implementing durable accountability systems were needed to determine if a check and balance on the initial effectiveness of ESSA as interpreted by the TEA could be ascertained. To help educators comply with the shift toward shared accountability that occurred with ESSA, establishing their understanding of the implementation model in Texas and ability to foresee potential benefits and weaknesses was needed to benefit policy makers in the future. Considering researchers had not explored the shared accountability models emerging from ESSA, this study was formed as a quest for discovery.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand superintendents' perspectives about school accountability in Texas based on the shift towards a shared accountability system, and their beliefs on the role of local control as school districts are graded by the state of Texas. To validate what might be perceived as an uncharted investigation regarding these questions, this topic was explored through discussions with three urban school district superintendents and three deputy superintendents. The interdependent relationships of structural linkages between state and local school entities were examined to understand how best to align the systemic linkages for accountability based on the measures of performance. Also, the superintendents and their deputies provided their perspectives on the impact the shift toward a shared accountability system had on their school districts.

The impact of school accountability on higher stake assessment driven measures used to evaluate school districts' performance was investigated. Models and conceptual frameworks, such as Johnson and Chrispeels (2010), provided a contextual framework elaborating the multitude of lens utilized to examine complex organizations such as school districts comprehensively. This study used the Johnson and Chrispeels framework to view the accountability practices and situations within the context of current policies for measuring accountability by state and local education agencies. Therefore, shared accountability factors were discovered and examined from the perspectives of urban school district practitioners to represent their viewpoints about student achievement and accountability.

### **Research Questions**

The TEA was responsible for administering educational institutions that promote student and organizational achievement in Texas. Currently, school organizational success in Texas was measured by a grade framework delineated by four domains. School districts' superintendents addressed student learning as core business of a school district. The intent of this study was to research how district school leaders experienced and understood the shift in the shared accountability system as they performed their roles.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) contended that "qualitative approaches to inquiry are uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues" (p. 38). Because this was a qualitative inquiry, the research questions were purposefully open-ended utilizing exploratory verbs and beginning with words such as what or how (Creswell, 2009). The terminology used for the questions reflected the research intent

and created a map for data collection (Creswell, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the following questions helped establish the research agenda and further drive the investigation. The following research questions enabled the purpose of the study to be achieved:

1. What are perspectives of district leaders within the shift from a state-imposed accountability system to shared accountability in Texas?
2. How would district leaders of urban districts define the movement toward local control?
3. How do school leaders envision a plan of action for shared accountability?

### **Significance of the Study**

The researcher was interested in exploring how superintendents perceive the shift in the state school accountability system. Research had not yet surfaced, at the beginning of this study, about the interactivity between superintendents and the shared accountability system. This investigation yielded implications relative to researchers, school administrators, public, legislators, and students. This study called attention to differences in perspectives from practitioners and legislators about current accountability models. This study's phenomenological findings might offer ideas for framing the results for future research opportunities. From these findings, recommendations for further improving the present systemic linkages utilized by schools as aligned with the accountability framework and social justice for all students as established by ESSA and by Texas' House Bill (HB) 5 regarding high school graduation requirements were made.

The study contributed to the literature on local control and accountability of school districts focused on increasing student achievement through the lens of social justice and equity between students of different backgrounds, such as low SES, English language learner status, or race. The findings further informed legislators who continue to develop future school accountability systems. Learning about how superintendents made meaning of student achievement and shared outcomes with their constituents could be of importance to strategic planning initiatives and accountability enterprises. Policymakers interested in further developing relationships with their school leaders might benefit from exposure to the rich descriptive accounts of how superintendents and their deputies describe their lived experiences with managing local control over accountability and the role of superintendency.

The findings and perspectives offered in this study could be used to help with evaluating current policies and the intended A-F accountability grading system. The findings might enable school administrators interested in meeting the needs of students of all ages and backgrounds opportunities to establish different local structural and educational approaches to encourage the development of networks on a more comprehensive evaluation of school systems. Investigating how superintendents experience and understand the accountability framework may aid members of governing boards to decipher key issues between superintendents and constituents more effectively. Discovering how superintendents perceive interactivity with their state might benefit educators and school leaders by providing perspective that may inform their role when tasked with navigating issues that involve student achievement and accountability.

School boards charged with superintendent oversight might glean awareness from information relating to themes associated with how superintendents experience the shift in the accountability system. Relative knowledge of how superintendents experience and understand the accountability system might assist trustees on school boards seeking to maximize their executive advocacy and oversight responsibilities. Exposure to the themes that emerged from the data might unify and further motivate consortiums, such as the Public Education Visioning Institute (PEVI, 2008), seeking to influence the accountability process. The study qualitatively acknowledged superintendents' stories relating to the interactivity between educational leaders, policymakers, and their constituents. This perspective contributed broadly to public education by further broadcasting an important view emanating directly from the superintendent voice.

### **Limitations**

The credibility of process is paramount to qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). While this form of inquiry provides for rich description, the methodological limitations include the complexity of design which requires extended time and effort (Creswell, 2009). Additional considerations need to be made when using a qualitative approach due to the active role of the researcher as an instrument (Merriam, 1998). To address this limitation, a semi-structured approach with predetermined preliminary questions was taken to ensure each of the participants experience a consistent interview design (Patton, 1990).

While the study design creates an opportunity for investigating the way superintendents experience and understand the shift in the accountability system, the

phenomenological design designates a small study size. Qualitative research focuses on the experience of a few individuals in an effort to infer aspects of a phenomenon involving many (Creswell, 2009). This research effort recognized superintendent perspectives as constantly shifting based on ongoing adjustments that can impact decision making and actions (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000). To best qualify observations, one must acknowledge perception is generated from unique underpinnings representing individual beliefs and signifying relevance only in the present moment (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). Therefore, because telling the participants' stories through their voices, their perspectives, their lived experiences, and their understanding, the findings might not generalize to superintendents or school districts within Texas and in other states.

### **Delimitations**

The study followed a qualitative research approach, involving the use of the structured interview as the primary method. The sample participated in a preliminary descriptive examination of the perspectives and experiences of superintendents and deputy superintendents. No more than three urban school districts were represented in the sample and were limited to educators who were superintendents and deputy superintendents as these educators make the guiding decisions for local control over shared accountability.

### **Assumptions**

An assumption existed that superintendents and school leaders had knowledgeable perspectives regarding local school accountability. Another assumption



was about the role of the superintendent and deputy superintendent as the most vital components in school districts' decision-making processes. The researcher assumed the data were reliable, and the participants were honest.

### **Definition of Terms**

The terms defined in this section were operationalized in this investigation of Texas superintendents.

**A-F accountability rating system.** The 84th Legislature passed HB 2804, changing the Texas school accountability system so that every campus and district receives one of five ratings from A to F. Much like students receive grades in individual subjects and those are combined for a GPA, the law requires schools and districts to be issued grades based on five different areas of performance or “domains,” and those five grades must be combined into a single overall rating (TEA, 2017).

**Closing the gaps (Domain III).** There are many ways to determine how effectively campuses are closing achievement gaps. The approach examined how well campuses throughout Texas are doing today in terms of student achievement for their economically disadvantaged students given how many economically disadvantaged students they have (TEA, 2017).

**Economic disadvantage.** A K-12 student is economically disadvantaged if he or she is eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program.

**Urban school district.** An urban school district, as operationalized in this study is located in a county with a population of at least 950,000; has one of largest district

enrollments in the county or enrollment zones contiguous to the largest district in the county; and has at least 35% of its enrolled students classified as economically disadvantaged (TEA, 2017).

**Local control.** The local/state partnership in providing public education is founded on a set of core values: equity, adequacy, and liberty. Equity and adequacy are associated with the state’s responsibility to fund public education, while local control of decisions that matter is embedded in the concept of liberty. The value of local control, however, has been superseded by the dominant value of state control (PEVI, 2008).

**Postsecondary readiness (Domain IV).** At the elementary and middle school level this involves the use of chronic absenteeism. Middle school incorporates the middle school drop-out rate. At high school, Domain IV is based partially on the graduation rate and partially on the percentage of students graduating with a higher level graduation plan but also includes the percentage of students who graduate ready for college, career, or the military, as evidenced by SAT/ACT/AP/IB/dual credit, an industry credential or appropriate CTE course sequence, or military enlistment (TEA, 2017).

**Shared Accountability.** School districts share responsibility for developing students’ educational outcomes with partners and stakeholder in their communities (Bathgate et al., 2011). Bathgate et al. (2011) required four elements “for a robust system of shared accountability” (p. 4):

- An overarching vision of student success.
- Objectives, metrics, and performance targets aligned with the vision for each of the participating entities as well as for the collaborative as a whole.

- A system for collecting, analyzing, and communicating student-level outcomes data as well as information on the partners' organizational performance.
- Strong, sustained, civic leadership, supported by an intermediary organization dedicated to making the community's vision a reality. (p. 4)

**State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR).** The STAAR test was built and validated by actual student performance so that achieving a Final Level II proficiency rate is indicative of a student who, if that proficiency level is maintained through high school, has a better than 60% chance of passing freshman college level math & English courses. The Advanced Level III proficiency rate is indicative of a student who has a better than 75% chance of passing those courses (TEA, 2017).

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

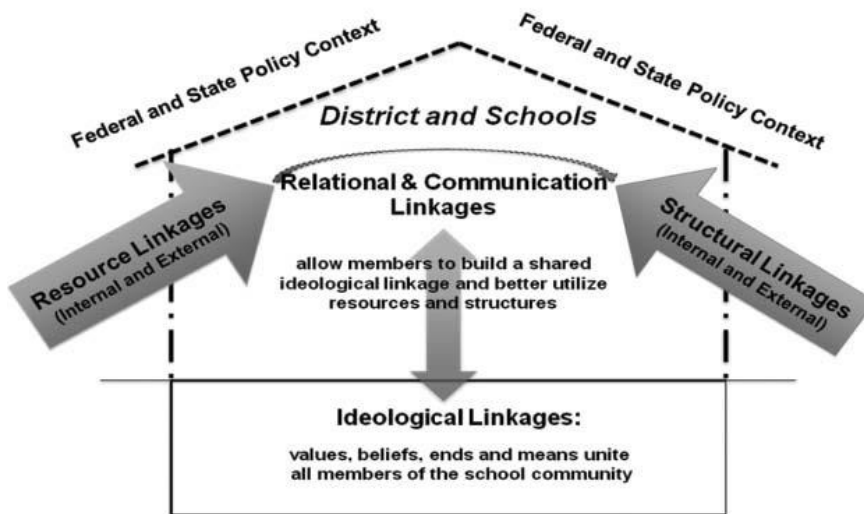
The purpose of the study was to explore and understand superintendents' perspectives about school accountability in Texas based on the current shift towards a shared accountability system and their beliefs on the role of local control as school districts are graded by the state. This chapter provides the conceptual framework and explains the methods for conducting the literature review. The literature review contains the background of accountability, school report cards as accountability tools, socioeconomic and race gaps in academic achievement, school finance, and local control in the era of ESSA as sections pertaining to the purpose of the study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

After 35 years of focus on schools as the unit of change, policy makers now recognize that schools are embedded in systems and that the relationship between the district and its schools are critical for improvement (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). The challenge for school districts' leaders is to develop support student achievement with adequate funding. When examining the impact of higher accountability in school systems, leaders must ensure that there is a balance in the use of Bolman and Deal's (2008) frames in developing an effective organization. The human resource frame is important to consider when developing professional support, advocacy, and creating empowerment that increases participation, support, and moves decision making down into the organization. Several lines of research have found that effective leaders and organizations rely on multiple frames (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 326). Districts must find the right balance between centralized controls, and fulfilling the bureaucratic functions

required for large school districts while ensuring the support and commitment of teachers as professionals.

Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) noted that organizational linkages are highly complex and unable to be redesigned with simplicity, such as by basic shifting the allocation of power and resources. Large urban school districts are challenged with determining the alignment of resources to best support student achievement. Lasky (2004) defined resource linkages as encompassing material, technological, and human capital brought to the system to enhance reform. However, Datnow et al. (2006) maintained that both “resource partnerships” (p. 191) and professional development help districts to increase leadership capacity as well as teacher knowledge regarding content and pedagogy. While SES unquestionably have a strong association with student achievement (Sirin, 2005), other factors within the control of schools appear to be more important. These characteristics include the faculty’s collective efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), faculty trust in students and parents (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Hoy, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998), and the school’s academic emphasis (Goddard, LoGerfo, & Hoy, 2004). Each of these characteristics can be affected by the actions of principals and other school leaders, and each provides a clear focus for efforts to improve academic achievement, even in high-poverty schools as seen in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Model showing the relationship between five major linkages between a district and its schools according to Johnson and Chrispeels (2010).

The structure illustrated above describes the linkages between aligning structural and resource connections as tools for control and accountability. School district structures and resource linkages can create both clear directives and opportunities for cohesiveness. Financial resources can be used for district personnel who create a direct connection between the schools and central office. This structure can add tension to teachers feel their professionalism was undermined. The model by Johnson and Chrispeel (2010) showed the five major linkages between districts and its schools highlighted the relational and ideological linkages available for enhancing professional accountability and commitment.

The ideological linkage, addressing end goals and means, provides the foundation from which to build school transformation. This linkage defines the values and beliefs that guide mission and form the core instructional principles that give form, coherence, and direction to the system (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). The relational and

communication linkages permeate the system and determines whether shared agreements about ideology can be established. Although Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) stated “if the force of the bureaucratic controls dominates, however, without adequate attention to professional relationships and ideological linkages, it seems unlikely that the reforms will be successful or have lasting effects” (p. 771). The allocation of resources can be controversial at the local due to stakeholders’ political interests and the existing ethical dilemmas found within school systems (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). School leaders maintain the responsibility to ensure student learning and achievement as a first priority while managing financial resources. Through the political frame, consequently, constituents continually compete for limited resources (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

### **Methods for Conducting the Literature Review**

To conduct this review of the literature regarding public school accountability and local control of schools. The following peer reviewed article databases were searched: ERIC, Academic Search Premiere, Professional Development Collection, and Psychological and Behavioral Sciences Collection. The keyword search terms were “NCLB,” “ESSA,” “accountability,” “shared accountability,” “policy,” “compliance,” “high stakes tests,” “local control,” “school governance,” “leadership,” “social justice,” “racial equity,” “race,” “socioeconomic status,” and “students.”

### **Accountability Background**

The standards movement emerged as a result of the long struggle for educational equality opportunities provided to children of color. The campaign for school reform began in 1954 with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in favor of Brown who alleged that

separate by race did not provide an equal education to all children of all races in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Once the Court ruled in favor of Brown that in fact it was unconstitutional to segregate schools by race, public education in the nation took a different turn toward the federal government becoming increasingly involved in regulating the public schools managed by each state (Coleman et al., 1966).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included Title VI to prohibit recipients of federal funds, such as public schools, from discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin. In addition, the 1966 release of the Coleman et al. report involved documentation of the strong association between socioeconomic class and academic achievement. Coleman et al. concluded that “only a small part of [student achievement] is the result of school factors, in contrast to family background differences between communities” (p. 297). Over the years, researchers confirmed the presence of a strong link between socioeconomic factors and academic achievement (e.g., Jencks et al., 1972; Sirin, 2005). The 1964 law was necessary for promoting education across all classes in the nation.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) began reporting the results of sample student achievement snapshots at the ages of 9, 13, and 17 years old in 1970 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). During this time, scores between Black and White students narrowed substantially from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. In this same period, compensatory education program funding such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act were implemented to increase equity of educational opportunity for students in poverty-stricken schools (Lhamon et al., 2018). Although this effort could have been one remedy for the social ills impacting academic



achievement, schools simply have not succeeded in educating students of poverty equally alongside students not of poverty, representing a problem that continues to strike many educators and policymakers as unacceptable (Oshomirsky & Williams, 2015; Sirin, 2005). Interestingly, few districts in the western portion of Texas integrated schools within a few years of the Brown decision, many districts in Texas fought desegregation well into the 1960s and 1970s (American Bar Association, 2013).

In the spring of 1983, the National Commission of Excellence in Education charged education officials, school leaders, and the American public with complacency (see p. 2 of *A Nation at Risk*). The report is now over 30 years old and continues to underscore the issues of race and poverty inequality that impact public education. Given the problematic outcomes highlighted by the National Commission's report, the urgency for rethinking how to approach public education involves deep analysis and alignment of thought with school districts and policy officials (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Reframing educational functions is core to analyzing and solving problem situations (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 12).

In the new millennium, the standards and accountability movement reached a peak level under the President George W. Bush administration through federal level reforms involving the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 5). The NCLB movement mandated educational accountability systems had to correlate student assessments with learning standards to measure student achievement (Sherman, 2008). The NCLB required states and school districts to reevaluate their accountability structures (Terry, 2010). NCLB was thought to

be a treatment for the problem of the race and poverty gaps in educational attainment, but the national emphasis of bringing all students, even those in poverty, up to high standards of achievement did little to improve these students' plight (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006).

According to Bolman and Deal (2008), a structure is "a blueprint for officially sanctioned expectations and exchanges among internal players (executives, managers, employees) and external constituencies (such as customers and clients)" (p. 50).

However, as Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) indicated:

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 created a more tightly coupled educational policy system with an emphasis on aligned accountability systems and curriculum frameworks as a means of improving student achievement. The result has been an increased demand for coordinated communication and distribution of resources across the system. (p. 739)

Under NCLB (2002), state education agencies lacked adequate budgets and structural frameworks to pay for the infrastructure needed to implement and monitor quality accountability systems. Schools' inability to fund the required NCLB infrastructure was a weakness of the national accountability movement (Ladd, 2017).

As part the federal government becoming involved in developing national standards and tests to establish alignment for measuring student achievement accountability, the Common Core State Standards were implemented to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students need to learn in school ("Overview," 2014). This movement mandated educational accountability systems to tie student assessments with learning standards to measure student achievement. This piece of

legislation created a need to reevaluate state and school district accountability structures. The Common Core State Standards required providing a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn (“Overview,” 2014).

As the Common Core standards became controversial, Texas rejected it (Williams, 2013). Texas, instead, responded to the increased accountability mandates by developing the new State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) accountability system (TEA, 2010). STAAR assessments were significantly more rigorous than previous tests and measure student performance as well as academic growth. With the adoption of House Bill (HB) 5 in 2013, the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2013) continued working to bridge achievement gaps, address the needs of school districts, and adopt policies to transform student learning.

HB 5 required the Texas education commissioner to adopt a transition plan to implement HB 5 and replace the existing high school graduation programs with the newly passed Foundation High School Program beginning with the 2014-2015 school year (TEA, 2013). HB 5 enabled students who entered high school before the 2014-2015 school year to graduate under the new guidelines and to earn endorsements for STEM and vocational skills. The State Board of Education adopted rules related to the new Foundation High School Program in January 2014. The TEA (2013), in collaboration with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Workforce Commission, developed the Graduation Toolkit to provide essential information to students, parents, and counselors about the new Foundation High School Program.

To comply with federal requirements and in an effort to guide students toward college readiness, bridge performance gaps, and offer equitable educational opportunities Texas complied with NCLB. It is necessary to consider, the rollout of STAAR and the HB5 graduation requirements were received as significantly more rigorous measures of student performance. The U.S. Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 that relinquished federal oversight of student performance accountability and returned control to the states as a more flexible approach to school accountability and transferring more responsibility to the state. The ESSA-enabled frame of shared accountability offered districts across the state to have local control over how to measure compulsory learning among all students and provide an equitable education for students regardless of their socioeconomic background.

After 30 years of focus on schools as the unit of change, policy makers now recognize that schools are embedded in complex sociopolitical systems and that the relationship between the school district and its schools are critical for improvement (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p. 739). The challenge for school district leaders is to develop internal linkages that support student achievement. When examining the impact of higher levels of shared accountability in school systems, leaders must ensure balance in the use of various frames in developing an effective organization. As Bolman and Deal (2008) suggested, the human resource frame is important to consider when developing professional support, advocacy, and creating empowerment that increases participation, support, and moves decision making down into the organization.

The construction of ESSA and its policy set in motion the challenge for districts to find the right balance between centralized controls, and fulfilling the bureaucratic functions required for large school districts, while ensuring the support and commitment of school districts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). In their discussions, educators and policy makers have addressed the lack of progress in student achievement at U.S. schools for almost three decades. With the higher learning standards and postsecondary readiness requirements, there is consensus on developing new approaches for more effective educational accountability (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016).

Texas is not a novice at creating local accountability models for student learning, as demonstrated in 2006, by the creation of PEVI. The Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA, 2016) has continually favored local control options for school accountability. TASA reported that local control school transformation began in 2006 with 30 superintendents forming the PEVI which spent 2 years to envision the transformation of Texas public education to meet the needs of 21st century students. The PEVI promoted using the public school system to foster innovation, creativity, and the passion for learning. The PEVI also sought to champion meaningful assessments of student learning. The result of the PEVI's efforts yielded the 2008 document *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas* to guide the state's school transformation movement (TASA, 2016).

Due to the PEVI's work, the 82nd Texas legislature established the Texas High Performance Schools Consortium with Senate Bill 1557 to improve student learning through innovative high-priority learning standards, assessments, and accountability

systems (TASA, 2016). The Texas High Performance Schools Consortium (THPSC) was composed of representatives from 23 Texas school districts. Soon after the THPSC began its work, the realization of any efforts to develop new assessment and accountability systems would be constrained by the existing systems. When the THPSC produced its report for the state in December 2012, it recommended HB 2824 to the 2013 legislative session. Governor Rick Perry vetoed HB 2824, which would have allowed the THPSC member districts to have the flexibility to pilot a new locally based accountability program, free from the current state-administered system's constraints to advance research, exploration, development, and implementation of innovative systems without being overly reliant on high-stakes testing (TASA, 2016).

In November 2013, THPSC invited additional school districts engaged in school transformation activities across the state to participate in its statewide efforts (TASA, 2016). To date, nearly 80 districts have joined the THPSC. In March 2014, THPSC generated a report to capture participants' desire to implement the PEVI. The THPSC has continued to collaborate with the State Board of Education and TEA staff to revise the English language arts and reading curriculum according to standards set in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and to identify high-priority learning standards. As the result of these efforts, in December 2014, the Consortium released a second report (TASA, 2016).

The 84th Texas Legislature's HB 18 expanded the THSPC officially and followed recommendations from the second report (TASA, 2016). The main policy adoption was the development of a non-high-stakes assessment and accountability framework. As seen

in this historical summary, Texas has experimented in creating local controls, such as THPSC, with success that may grow during the new ESSA era.

### **School Report Cards as Accountability Tools**

The creation and implementation of ESSA required states to evaluate their school accountability systems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). In review of the literature, many states are moving towards school report cards as measures for school accountability. As of 2015, 16 states adopted school accountability systems based on some version of a Grade of A through F system (Howe & Murray, 2015). Howe and Murray (2015) examined three types of validity in respect to A through F accountability systems as a measure of school quality. Currently, A through F grades issued to schools are associated with rewards and consequences for school districts. Florida's Opportunity Scholarship Program allows students enrolled in poor performing school for 3 consecutive years to exit and enroll in higher performing schools (Howe & Murray, 2015). Moreover, these grade based accountability systems include market accountability for parents and students to make choices about leaving one school system over another. Proponents of A through F accountability systems argue that parents can use these report cards for making informed choices about the schools their children attend (StudentsFirst, 2013).

The A-F grade accountability systems appeal to policy makers and parents as a good method to convey school quality, promote parent participation, and focus on school improvement (StudentsFirst, 2013). Since 1999 years, A through F accountability systems have gained popularity in about 50% of the states' public education programs. The first to establish such system was Florida when Jeb Bush, then Florida's governor,

worked with legislators to craft the A+ Education Plan in 1999 (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2016). Florida is a state frequently cited for success in using the A-F grade system. Jeb Bush's Foundation for Florida's Future (2017) argued:

Assigning a letter grade (A-F) is a way to report a school's effectiveness in a manner everyone can understand. Used along with rewards for improving schools and support for schools that need to improve, grading schools encourages them to make student achievement their primary focus. (para. 1)

Similarly, the Arizona Department of Education (2012) expressed that their A to F grades are clearly understandable and easy for parents to understand how well their schools perform. Other states such as the West Virginia Department of Education (2014) claimed "giving schools letter grades for their performance—just as we do for our students—ensures that parents, students, educators and communities understand how their schools are performing" (p. 1). Based on the states' documents about implementing their A through F public school accountability systems, there is consensus that the system is clear, concise, and encourages parents to be involved in school choice.

The validity of school report cards as a measure of school quality can be viewed from multiple perspectives (Howe & Murray, 2015). The idea that a single composite grade encompasses the multidimensional criteria of student achievement is a dubious proposition (NASSP, 2016). Policy makers in each state select the criteria and decide how to weigh what they choose to measure for school grading purposes without having the technical knowledge and skills necessary. Secondly, the five point scale is a generic



categorical scale to compare schools (Howe & Murray, 2015). The numerical intervals of the composite scores that are translated into the various grades, such as the weighting of the multiple criteria used for the computations, have no empirical undergirding (NASSP, 2016). The overall value of the various factors leading to a single grade as a composite score for school quality is something to be considered and evaluated.

Proficiency levels as measures of academic achievement reveal problems of imprecision and lack of interpretability of proficiency levels correlated to the academic achievement of school grades (Howe & Murray, 2015). Howe and Murray (2015) cautioned using imprecise measurements for issuing grades to schools such as “converting original test score data to proficiency levels and using the new proficiency data to produce values for achievement and growth” (p. 6). Interestingly, the Oklahoma Center for Education Policy and the Center for Educational Research and Evaluation (2013) argued that such nonlinear conversion reduces the value of the information provided by students’ academic performance. The empirical analysis of Oklahoma school grades revealed minimal differences in average science and reading scores among ratings of A, B, or C. In order for the letter grade to be meaningful the letter grade would have to represent the school’s performance pattern; however, when multiple variations among the subject areas within schools occur, such ratings do not reveal nuances that occur in reality (Howe & Murray, 2015; NASSP, 2016). These inconsistencies in grading fluctuations could potentially create unclear representations and inaccurately measure student achievement.

The abundance of research demonstrates that school effects usually account for less than 30% of student academic achievement. Utilizing an A through F school grade can be deceptive because it ignores the multiple factors that contribute to school performance (Howe & Murray, 2015; NASSP, 2016). The validity of the A-F grading system as a policy instrument must be examined from the perspective on how the system is fulfilling the proponents' ideology. Rhodes (2014) investigated the general relationship between state accountability systems and parents' attitudes toward government, particularly parents' involvement in their children's education. Rhodes found that "parents residing in states with more developed assessment systems express significantly lower trust in government, substantially decreased confidence in government efficacy, and much more negative attitudes about their children's schools" (p. 183). Accountability policies "demobilize parents by excluding them from key educational decisions and enmeshing their children's schools in a punitive testing context that elicits parental anxiety and dissatisfaction" (Rhodes, 2014, p. 183). Through its design of a shared accountability system, ESSA addresses the feelings of polarization and lack of trust displayed by parent toward the public school systems.

The validity of school report cards as a democratic assessment framework is plagued because restructuring of schools is continual and subject to democratic deliberation (Howe & Murray, 2015). Proponents of the A-F systems claim they produce democratic engagement as a matter of course, as when, for example, the West Virginia Department of Education argued that "the greatest benefit of the A through F school grading system is heightened community awareness and increased dialogue and action

among education stakeholders” (Howe & Murray, 2015, p. 1). Also, existing evidence suggests that A-F systems stifle democratic control over educational structures (Howe & Murray, 2015). It was apparent during the shift into the new shared accountability model and A-F grading system for schools, further investigation was required to validate the success of school report card grading systems.

### **Socioeconomic and Race Gaps in Academic Achievement**

Despite research and decades of reform, academic achievement gaps by race and socioeconomic status (SES) continue to plague schools (Hays, 2011; Sherman, 2008). The American public education system is free and accessible to children of all backgrounds. Unfortunately, creating a meaningful learning pathway for children born into poverty and marginalized because of racial discrimination has left America with unequal learning opportunities for some children. A significant body of research suggests that schooling in the U.S. does not provide equalized resources, skills, or opportunities (e.g., Hays, 2011). The achievement gap between children of poverty and all other children is troubling given the overlap of race and poverty coexists as evidenced by the wide gap in student achievement (Fram, Miller-Cribbs, & Van Horn, 2007). “It’s going to take some intentionality, rethinking, and a commitment to prioritize the country’s most underserved students to get us out of the equity desert, and headed towards an education future with richer, greener pastures” (Bishop & Jackson, 2015, p. 4).

The research is conclusive on the implications of SES and race because African American and Latino children reared in low-income households demonstrate lower

academic performance across developmental domains when compared to their White and more affluent counterparts (Benner & Wang, 2014; Coleman et al., 1966; Garcia & Weiss, 2017). Specifically, race/ethnicity and SES have been found to predict children's academic progress and ultimate educational successes. Similarly, socioemotional well-being seems to be more compromised for children reared in low-SES homes because those youth exhibit greater externalizing problems, depression, and general psychological maladaptation (Benner & Wang, 2014).

The American public education system's production of significant differences between children of different SES and races/ethnicities among its opportunities in educational processes and experiences is well documented. Teacher quality impacts the social and physical context in the delivery of instruction, the quality of activities, and the structuring of learning experiences, basically in the impact of the quality of all experiences children have as learners (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Unfortunately, high-poverty and majority minority schools, on average, offer teachers with less experience, less education, and lower levels of credentialing (Fram, 2007). Biddle and Berliner (2003) reported inequities in per student funding are also associated with these schools' sizable differences in academic outcomes, largely because of offering teachers who have lesser qualifications to the students.

### **School Finance**

During NCLB's (2002) era, some school districts lacked the structures and funding necessary to achieve educational accountability. Educators faced funding inequity in educational accountability. While adequate resources tend to remain an issue

of continued debate in education, educators must find more effective and efficient ways to use funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 7), especially in the new ESSA era that began in 2015. School and reform funding serve as key linkages between systemic levels because they are structural conditions for operating schools and supporting improvement efforts (Lasky, 2004, p. 7). With the power to fund schools, states regulate their funding efforts using accountability and student achievement results via programs including A-F grading systems. This statewide accountability process can pose as a root of plausible contention, school leaders may experience frustration when their efforts earn their campus a rating of A, though this rating leads to less state input about district processes and programs while also leading to the district receiving fewer resources and support (Howe & Murray, 2015). The A-F system and its shared accountability model involve shifts enabling districts to impose more local control and power over choosing student achievement accountability structures.

### **Local Control in the Era of ESSA**

The increased role of federal policy, as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War, resulted in each state becoming more responsible for insuring district compliance with federal regulations as well as state laws. To meet multiple challenges in catering to the children of many special interests, school districts expanded the numbers of administrators who regulated achievement outcomes. Driver, Thorp, and Kuo (1997) concluded that the administrator expansions caused districts to not only grow larger “but also more homogeneous, as they all establish the same types of departments or offices to administer these new programs” (p. 14, as cited in Jennings, Noblit, Brayboy, & Cozart,

2007). Furthermore, Jennings et al. (2007) determined that the wide array of federal, state, and local policies has fostered a “highly rule-bound organizational culture in districts” (p. 15).

The standardization and uniformity of federal, state, and local policy and procedures within school districts maximized their compliance and control functions. In fact, the recent reform era brought increased state centralization and reinforced state oversight, rather than local control, of school districts (Ladd, 2017). Accountability policy and high stakes testing have essentially centered on individual schools as the focus of state efforts. School districts found their historic control and compliance functions to be less relevant due to the state directly requiring uniform compliance of schools, regardless of the school’s specific population of students. Moreover, school children’s performance on high stakes tests implicated districts as unacceptable educational producers. Districts had to assume a facilitative function for the schools beyond what they had been historically designed to facilitate (Jennings et al., 2007).

The federal government’s 2015 ESSA offers a new approach to school accountability compared to the original NCLB (2002). Under ESSA states are still be required to test students in reading and mathematics in Grades 3 through 8. However, ESSA takes makes allowances and takes into consideration the discrete demographic of schools. ESSA’s approach to a local and shared accountability system allows states to provide holistic or high school students, states can provide data for whole schools according specific student subgroups, such as English language learner, special education student, race (i.e., White, Black, Hispanic, etc.), and students of poverty.

States gain discretion with ESSA (2015) to choose what goals to set, to determine what to hold schools and districts accountable for, and to decide how to intervene in low-performing schools. Student achievement assessments continue to be part of state accountability systems. In addition, states may incorporate additional factors such as school-climate and teacher engagement or access to and success in advanced coursework (Klein, 2015).

ESSA allowed states and districts to use locally-developed, evidence-based interventions (Klein, 2015). However, states must flag districts and schools in which specific subgroups of students are known for chronically struggling in the bottom 5% of performers among comparison groups (Black, 2017). Additionally, states must report schools where less than two-thirds of students graduate. Other changes include repurposing of monies such as the removal of the federal School Improvement Grant program. On the other hand, ESSA established new resources for states to use for school turnarounds.

The biggest changes in ESSA include relaxing the requirements of the NCLB's highly qualified teachers and away from a federal role in teacher evaluations (Klein, 2015). Civil rights groups received the new regulations regarding measuring the performance of each subgroup of students separately very positively because states could no longer rely solely on broad grouping of student subgroups. ESSA combined about 50 programs, some of which had not been funded in years, into opportunities for highly funded grants (Klein, 2015). These historical layers influencing school function provide an opportunity to explore how school districts have dealt with federal, state, and local

policies over the previous accountability oriented era and to adapt to ESSA's focus on creating educational equity for all students by locally pursuing high college and career standards, directing resources to areas requiring improvement, using evidenced-based interventions to improve schools, not overshadowing teaching and learning with assessment mechanisms, increasing parents' access to quality preschool programs, and promoting promising educational practices with financial support (Sharp, 2016).



## **Chapter 3: Methods**

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand school leaders' perspectives about school accountability shift towards shared accountability in Texas and their beliefs on the role of local control as school districts are graded by the state. This chapter includes the elements of the design of the study. Additionally, the various steps for completing the study also appear in this chapter.

### **Research Design**

Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined methodology as “a way of thinking about and studying social reality” (p. 3) and method as “a set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analyzing data” (p. 3). The selected research methodology was qualitative with a phenomenological perspective that best aligns with the purpose of the study. A phenomenological inquiry “is an attempt to deal with inner experiences unprobed in everyday life” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how superintendents and deputy superintendents understand the shift in the accountability system. The qualitative method was applied because current literature lacked descriptions of the interactivity between the state and local entities within the educational environment.

Qualitative research stresses the need to put analyses in context (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative researchers tend to use phenomenology more often than other approaches to establish context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The phenomenological approach enables researchers to pursue meaning from reports of human interactions based on the participants' perspectives of their circumstances. This research method enables

researchers to present the interpretations of many, sometimes competing, groups interested in outcomes, such as student achievement (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Individual interviews provided the opportunity to explore characteristics of measuring student achievement. The emphasis on the human being as the primary research instrument was vital to the study. Hays and Singh (2011) stated that “these paradigms [enable] researchers not only seek to understand a phenomenon through various subjective lenses, but also strive to create social and political changes to improve the lives of participants” (p. 41). The involved superintendents’ voices were at the core of this investigation as their lived experiences to shed light on this phenomenon.

In this study, the researcher made strategic decisions regarding selection of methodology, data collection, subject sampling, and data analysis. Guba and Lincoln (1994) reported that the manner in which humans respond to the social environment is based on their own perspectives and significantly affects future actions and interactions. The phenomenological paradigm consequently supported the study of the lived experiences and worldviews of the participants.

A fundamental belief motivating this study emerged from an association with a constructivist disposition. Constructivist epistemology asserts knowledge is a product of the social context where meaning evolves from interactions with others (Crotty, 1998). Further support for constructivism is evident in the aim of this project to explore the way in which superintendents create and understand meaning through their own social constructions (Charmaz, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), a study steeped in constructivism requires the following:

- the researcher-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent
- reality is multiple, complex, and not easily quantifiable
- the values of the researcher, respondents, research site, and underlying theory undergird all aspects of the research
- the research product is context specific. (p.83)

A constructivist approach aims to both discover and describe the unique nature of those being investigated (Briodo & Manning, 2002). This epistemological approach was fitting for the study and structurally places superintendents' and deputy superintendents' voices at the center of the discovery. The data enabled the researcher to produce rich descriptions. The current method was chosen as effective for identifying meaning behind the human experience as related to notable collective occurrences (Creswell, 2009). The phenomenon of interest was how superintendents experienced and understood the shift in the accountability framework in the context of local control. The phenomenological foundation of this study aimed "at attaining a profound understanding of the nature or meaning of our daily experiences" (Crotty, 1998, p. 25).

Phenomenology is common practice in research emanating from sociology, psychology, health sciences, and education (Creswell, 2007) through which the researcher is "interested in showing how complex meanings are built out of simple units of direct experience" (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). The lens of phenomenology helped with developing a comprehensive set of meanings based on accounts of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). After determining the phenomenological approach was

appropriate for this study, the following suggestions, as outlined by Creswell (2007) and derived from Moustakas (1994), were included in a procedural map for understanding how superintendents experience and understand the grading accountability framework:

- a phenomenon of interest to study is identified
- the researcher recognizes and specifies the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology
- data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon
- data analysis occurs through organized “clusters of meaning” and from these clusters evolves both textural and structural descriptions of the experience which leads to a composite description that presents the “essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell 2007, pp. 60-62)

### **Research Questions**

The following questions enabled the purpose of the study to be achieved:

1. What are perspectives of district leaders within the shift from a state-imposed accountability system to shared accountability in Texas?
2. How would district leaders of urban districts define the movement toward local control?
3. How do school leaders envision a plan of action for shared accountability?

### **Participants**

The criterion for selecting research sites was purposefully chosen because of the responsibilities of the urban school superintendent. The purposeful sampling for this study consisted of school administrators from urban school districts in the state of Texas.

Criterion used for selecting research sites included choosing school districts identified as urban school districts by the Texas Education Agency.

The researcher investigated the phenomenon through exploring the lived experiences of the superintendent and deputy superintendent participants regarding the n. The sample emerged based on specific criterion and need for conceptual clarity (Locke, 2001). Appropriate approval was obtained from the University of Texas Institutional Review Board. Appropriate saturation occurred when “no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category, the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions, and the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 212).

Researchers utilizing qualitative design seek interpretive information from the participants (McNabb, 2002). Boyd (2001) suggested research saturation can typically be attained between 2 and 10 participants. Therefore, based on the study’s design, the researcher interviewed a sample of six participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researcher utilized a purposeful sampling strategy to select superintendents from urban school districts by accessing the Texas Association for School Administrators database for initial contacts and through snowballing contacts thereafter. This strategy allowed for best developing a sample containing multiple perspectives to offer both depth and diversity (Creswell, 2007) and using those participants most likely to provide information relative to the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher next chose a modified snowball sampling effort to further connect with potential participants.

Involvement in the interviews presented minimal risks to the participants because data were collected by ensuring anonymity with pseudonyms. The participants invested time and energy engaging in interviews but did not receive any form of payment or service as compensation for their involvement. The participants might have benefitted through contributing to a body of knowledge that further informed concepts linked to school district accountability and superintendent leadership. All participant identifiers and responses were protected with the strictest level of confidentiality by use of pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were immediately applied at the time of consent and replaced all personal identifiers. Documents linking specific participant information to chosen pseudonyms were securely stored in a separate file and only reviewed by the researcher.

### **Instrumentation**

The qualitative data included more than words, attitudes, feelings, vocal, and facial expressions, and other behaviors. Cross (1981) acknowledged the importance of conducting studies using in-depth interviews to the growing body of information about adult learners. Therefore, the researcher was the instrument making the interpretations for all interview data. The researcher wrote field notes in conjunction with the interviews as well as with any follow-up communications with the participants. The field notes were written while the researcher listened to the participants' responses during the interviews as well as during reviews of written transcripts and reflections about particular interviews. Furthermore, the researcher ensured the questions asked of the participants adhered to the purpose of the study by using content experts for validation prior to commencing with the interviews.

## **Researcher Positionality**

Questions of reliability and validity in regard to qualitative research methods have been perennially raised. However, it is possible to carefully and objectively study the subjective experience with qualitative methods. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stressed the importance of maintaining systematic procedures in qualitative research. Blumer (1969) described both data collection and analysis as demanding and rigorous processes in which the researcher continually tests and revises images and conceptions. The orientation of the researcher to the topic and participants is critical to the success of the qualitative study.

Bosk (1999) referred to the privilege of being an observer or interviewer “a gift presented to the researcher by his or her host or subjects” (p. 203). Awareness of the relationship gifted to the researcher by the participants helps the researcher to deal with possible personal biases or prejudices. These important perspectives presented by qualitative researchers provided the foundation for the methodology, enabling the researcher to minimize bias-related problems.

To prepare for this constructivist-based investigation, the researcher personally reflected on how to make meaning (Crotty, 1998) and acknowledged that the participants could likely convey multiple meanings in their individual answers to the same question (Creswell, 2009). The researcher employed thoughtful review and self-examination throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The intentionality of the study design guided the interactive experiences and led to the emphasis of the evolving story as

told by the participants who shed light on how superintendents experience and understand the state's accountability system.

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

To represent the three urban school districts in Texas, the researcher conducted structured interviews with three superintendents and three deputy superintendents. Interviewing is a particularly effective technique for collecting data about the lived experience of participants (Berg, 2008). The superintendents met specific criteria before participating because the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2017) classifies Texas public school districts into community types using factors such as enrollment, growth in enrollment, economic status, and proximity to urban areas. These community, or district, types group districts into categories ranging from urban to rural. Charter school districts made up a ninth category (TEA, 2017). The superintendents and deputy superintendents were recruited from urban school districts. The urban school district term was operationalized in this study as: (a) being located in a county with a population of at least 950,000; (b) showing one of largest district enrollments in the county or enrollment zones contiguous to the largest district in the county; and (c) having at least 35% of its enrolled students classified as economically disadvantaged (TEA, 2017). Students listed as economically disadvantaged were eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program (TEA, 2017). The six interviews were conducted in March of 2018 to explore the lived experiences of the three deputy superintendents and three superintendents according to the state's ESSA-era accountability framework.



The welfare of study participants was guided by the university's IRB rules at all stages of this project with approval number 2017-09-0060. These efforts promoted trustworthiness and ensured the researcher evaluated all subjective efforts throughout every aspect of the study. Participants received the informed consent forms (Appendix A) and acknowledged they understood the scope of the project and outlined avenues available to them should they ever feel harmed by the process in writing. The researcher reviewed the procedures and informed consent materials with the participant. The researcher assured the participants that all their information would be masked with pseudonyms or special codes. The urban school districts were labeled by numbers of 1, 2, and 3. The superintendents became Respondent 1A for the first urban school district, Respondent 2A for the second urban school district, and Respondent 3A for the third urban school district. The deputy superintendents became Respondent 1B for the first urban school district, Respondent 2B for the second urban school district, and Respondent 3B for the third urban school district. The pseudonyms were put in place from the onset of the study to prevent data being represented by any other identifiers.

The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured approach reflecting on the framework presented in the literature. The researcher recorded each interview that varied in length from 45 minutes to 60 minutes using the interview guide (Appendix B) that was based on the three research questions and asked open-ended questions while conducting the interviews in a conversational style. The exact wording and order of each open-ended interview question remained flexible to enable the researcher to best navigate the interactive experience based on the rapport developed with each respondent (Merriam,

1998). The participants' interviews were face-to-face or Internet-facilitated such as by facetime or video calls. The settings for the face-to-face interviews were confidential environments in which the participants held a sense of safety without distractions about sharing their knowledge. Interview times and dates were determined according to the participants' schedules for their preferences and convenience.

All the taped interviews, documents, and field notes were entered into electronic files for facilitating data analysis. To ensure accuracy, participants received electronic copies of their transcribed interview and asked to verify and clarify data that the researcher was unsure about and to make further remarks as needed to complete the inquiry. In addition to the interviews and potential follow-up interviews, the researcher obtained artifacts that included copies of documents or other materials participants chose to share. Data analysis took place throughout the data collection process.

### **Data Analysis**

The data consisted of interview transcripts, field notes from observations, and artifacts represented by records and historical documents. Three processes for data analysis were blended together throughout the study and included the collection, coding, and analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach enabled the qualitative researcher to have the flexibility to change a line of inquiry or to move in new directions based on the acquisition of more information to gain a better understanding of what are relevant data (Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Open coding allowed for making connections between participants' responses to form categories and themes for furthering understanding about the superintendents' and

deputy superintendents' perspectives and for shaping the organization of the data for the portrayal of the findings. Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological data analysis model was used for the data analysis as follows:

1. The researcher thoroughly reads and rereads the transcribed interviews to identify with the data and to acquire a sense of each individual and his or her background and experiences.
2. From the transcripts the researcher identifies significant statements which pertain directly to the phenomenon.
3. The researcher develops interpretive meanings of each of the significant statements. The researcher rereads the research protocols to ensure the original description is evident in the interpretive meanings.
4. The interpretive meanings are arranged into clusters, which allow themes to emerge. The researcher seeks validation, avoids repetitive themes, and notes any discrepancies during this process.
5. The themes are then integrated into an exhaustive description. The researcher also refers the theme clusters back to the protocols to substantiate them.
6. The researcher produces a concise statement of the exhaustive description and provides a fundamental statement of identification also referred to as the overall essence of the experience.
7. The reduced statement of the exhaustive description is presented to the study's participants in order to verify the conclusions and the development of the essence statement. If discrepancies are noted, the researcher should go back

through the significant statements, interpretive meanings, and themes in order to address the stated concerns. (pp. 48-71)

Data collected in the interviews provided rich depictions of how superintendents and deputy superintendents understood the accountability framework and their beliefs about local control over accountability. Hycner (1999) recommended chronologically bracketing the commentary and beginning phenomenological reduction for data analysis. As the data reduction process developed, the researcher put more focus on connecting directly to the data for the purpose of confirming and revising emerging topics and redirecting those ideas to meaningful units. The final stage included thinking deeply about the evolving categories and searching for alternative understandings prior to converting the emergent categories into thematic units and using the themes to compose the final descriptive report. Creswell (2007) suggested researchers search for patterns by “pulling the data apart and putting them back together in more meaningful ways” (p. 163). Reaching the final stage of confirming themes involved summarizing, validating, and potentially, modifying ideas prior to settling on the final, unique themes formed the composite summary. Through this strategic process, the discovery of how superintendents experienced and understood the grade accountability framework within the context of maintaining local control was realized.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand school district leaders' perspectives about school accountability in Texas based on the shift towards a shared accountability system, and their beliefs on the role of local control as school districts are graded by the state of Texas. This study explored superintendents' as well as deputy superintendents' perspectives on this topic through interviews. Also, the participants' beliefs on the role of local control were acquired based on the state's accountability system. A void in previous research and literature explaining this phenomenon compelled the investigation of the superintendent perspective regarding school accountability frameworks. Studying the underpinnings of how public school superintendents, as well as deputy superintendents, understand the shift in the accountability system revealed the importance superintendents placed on interactions with the state accountability shift.

The phenomenological qualitative design guided this study. Data collection and analysis common to phenomenological research occurred. The three research questions were the following:

1. What are perspectives of district leaders within the shift from a state-imposed accountability system to shared accountability in Texas?
2. How would district leaders of urban districts define the movement toward local control?
3. How do school leaders envision a plan of action for shared accountability?

This chapter provides the findings for the research questions that evolved from the interview data collected from six educators who were public school superintendents as well as deputy superintendents' selected from three public urban school districts in Texas. Discrete analysis of the interview transcriptions allowed for identifying patterns and shared perspectives which later set the stage for theme emersion. After multiple, careful readings of each interview transcription, examination of the coding led to a streamlined delineation of meaning. The patterns in the participants' shared perspectives provided the researcher with an understanding of their lived experiences and current understanding of the accountability system. The researcher found themes from within the data. Direct quotes from interview transcriptions appear in the presentation of the findings to best represent the lived experiences of the participants and highlight, through their own voices, how they experienced and understood the phenomenon.

### **Participants**

The six participants were public school superintendents and their deputy superintendents. Three urban school districts were represented in the sample. The urban school districts were labeled by numbers of 1, 2, and 3. The superintendents became Respondent 1A for the first urban school district, Respondent 2A for the second urban school district, and Respondent 3A for the third urban school district. The deputy superintendents became Respondent 1B for the first urban school district, Respondent 2B for the second urban school district, and Respondent 3B for the third urban school district.

The sample was two males and four females who brought a variety of experience. The selected participant sample held an array of professional district-level experience ranging from 4.5 to 15 years. Table 1 depicts the characteristics of the sample and the urban school districts they led.

### Participants' Districts

District 1 had a student population of about 57,418 as an urban school district. The district served a student population composed of about 50% Hispanic, 20% White, 18% African American, 8% Asian, and 4% Other. Additionally, about 66% of the students were reported as economically disadvantaged and 26% as English Language Learners (ELLs). The district met state standard accountability and had a 4-year longitudinal graduation rate of 91.3%.

Table 1

#### *Participants' Characteristics*

Respondent	Years in Upper-Level Administration	Gender	Student <i>n</i> for District
1A	4.5	Male	57,418
1B	5.0	Female	
2A	11.0	Female	29,309
2B	14.0	Female	
3A	15.0	Male	86,869
3B	4.0	Female	

*Note.* The number refers to the district; districts were District 1, District 2, and District 3. The letter refers to the position in the district; A represents superintendents and B represents the deputy superintendents.

District 2 had a student population of about 29,309 and was considered an urban school district. The district served a student population composed of about 64%

Hispanic, 18% African American, 12% White, 3% Asian and 3% Other. Additionally, about 73% of the students were reported as economically disadvantaged and 28% as English Language Learners (ELLs). The district met state standards for accountability and had a 4-year longitudinal graduation rate of 87.9%.

District 3 had a student population of about 86,869 and was considered an urban school district. The district served a student population composed of about 63% Hispanic, 23% African American, 11% White, 2% Asian, and 1% Other. Additionally, about 76% of the students were reported as economically disadvantaged and 31% as English Language Learners (ELLs). The district met state standards for accountability and had a 4-year longitudinal graduation rate of 85.2%.

### **Thematic Findings**

Examining the data with diligence led the researcher to review and link the participants' perspectives and reactions noted during the interviews. The first transcription review resulted in creating codes of congruent perspectives and shared ideas. Conducting a deeper review of the transcription codes offered the opportunity to approach the data from a big picture perspective in search of common themes found through the participants narratives.

The researcher became immersed in the data to cluster concepts and discover patterns, sought feedback from others, revisited the data, revised the clustering, and then repeated the process, often several times. Pattern coding encouraged the researcher to reexamine the initial codes to identify patterns and relationships which then led to assigning category clusters, or data bucket labels. Through the process of analysis, the



researcher identified words and phrases as significant to the study. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the initial groupings of meaning through the context of the participants' complete responses. This helped with cross referencing overall meanings between participants and developing clusters. These groupings were originally organized into 13 coded clusters that were labeled as follows: Assessments, Funding, Closing the Achievement Gap, Equity, State Criteria, Student Growth and Experience, College and Workforce Readiness, Innovation and Authentic Assessments, 21st Century and Problem-Solving Skills, Desire for Clarity and Consistency, Leadership and Established Expectations, Training, Shared Accountability, and Multiple Forms of Accountability.

As previously explained, the data's codes were further refined through numerous cycle coding efforts. As data were further refined through a strategic lens, the coded clusters continued to evolve. The primary group of 13-coded clusters were further negotiated into 10 data clusters, each representing an evolving conglomerate of meaning. These sifted clusters included: Student Growth, Assessment Performance, Bridging Academic Achievement Gaps, College and Career Readiness, Assessment Innovation, Autonomy in Designing District Appropriate Curriculum and Assessment Measures, 21st Century Curriculum and Instructional Practices, Clear Expectations and Consistency Established by ESSA and its Guidelines, Community Awareness and Accountability, and Shared Accountability.

During this analysis, three core themes that described the phenomenon of interest emerged. From the data three overarching themes evolved with discrete focus on how public-school superintendents as well as deputy superintendents' experience and

understand the current shift in the school accountability system. Table 2 depicts the overarching themes, each theme is summarized with its subthemes.

Table 2

*Overarching Themes Found in the Data*

Overarching Theme	Associated Subthemes	Topical Reference <i>n</i>	Participant %
Student Performance	College and Career Readiness	41	83
	Assessments	27	67
	Student Growth	23	83
	Achievement Gap and Equity	14	67
Policy and Governance	State Accountability	71	67
	Clear Expectations, Clarity, and Understanding	32	67
	Local Accountability	27	67
Curriculum and Instruction	Innovation and Authentic Assessment	26	83
	Curriculum Design for 21st Century Instructional Practices	18	67

**Student Performance**

All six participants discussed student academic performance when describing student achievement and accountability. The participants expressed congruent interest and positions when describing public school districts as organizations built for developing student academic success. This theme outlined the significance the school superintendents and deputy superintendents placed on ensuring all students, regardless of background, have constant exposure to learning opportunities which propel scholars toward meeting the state standards and scaffolding them for success. This theme relates

to how superintendents defined and perceived school instructional accountability, equity, and the overall experience of the population of students served.

During the shared dialogue about student academic performance and its impact on achievement and accountability Respondent 1A noted, “What needs to continue is the hyper focus on instructional needs through conversations with constituents on celebrating achievements, with ensuring that the public understands that the organization is built for student academic success.” Congruently, Respondent 2A exclaimed, “That’s the value piece! The growth piece is a statistical analysis of the data with regard to student achievement, not just the state test, but other measures as well.” Respondent 3A stated emphatically, “If I could change the school accountability I would expand the definition of what is quality and what is achievement beyond test taking.”

In addition to a hyper focus on student achievement, four of the six participants expressed a simultaneous desire to offer equitable educational opportunities for students which surpass the minimal state student performance measures. Respondent 3A valued “the latitude that the ESSA will be giving states to develop their own program ... though providing an opportunity for schools that serve low income and language minority students to compete based on student growth is essential.”

Participants expressed their sense of personal accountability when describing an accountability system for student performance such as Respondent 2B and 3B who created a clear comparison to the current policies versus the equitable potential outcomes outlined by ESSA and its shared accountability system. Respondent 3B discussed a

preference for creating equitable and quality learning opportunities for all students because:

We're able to have a diverse need or type of school that meets the needs of all of our students. One that doesn't hold us accountable for student achievement, but that locally we're able to measure and monitor student achievement and that we're able to meet the needs of all of our students.

These two respondents expressed interest in measuring student performance in multiple forms beyond using the minimally required state assessments for student learning. Respondents 2B and 3B reasoned that superintendents should be held accountable for setting high expectations within their school districts in moving student learning toward growth beyond a minimum state assessment score. Such as Respondent 2B exclaimed:

I think successfully measuring learning can come with assessment, whether it be state assessment, whether it be norm-referenced assessments, whether it be college-board assessments. I do believe focusing more on a progress measure rather than just a set achievement score is where our superintendents can be held accountable for, having high expectations, and meeting the organizations forward, not just having to meet a minimum score on an assessment.

After careful analysis, common perspectives began to emerge which aligned to the theme of student performance. All participants shared their beliefs about closing or drastically minimizing student achievement gaps, student growth, student assessment performance, and college and career readiness.

**College and Career Readiness.** The college and career readiness theme arose multiple times throughout the interviews. Out of the six participants, Respondents 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, and 3B expressed a congruent goal of ensuring students are provided with learning experiences that prepare them for both college and the workforce. These five participants asserted that students should be exposed to more rigorous assessments and experience tighter curriculum alignment with colleges and universities. Examples of the college and career readiness narrative included Respondent 1B contending that “you want a strong workforce! Parents want kids that together to partner, on designing what this system looks like?”

In working toward the goal of ensuring scholars are college and career ready, Respondent 1A creatively reflected that “kids, nowadays, could come in and do simulations, much like they do in colleges.” In conjunction with Respondent 1A’s remarks, Respondent 2B said:

When I think, college readiness, I think college acceptance. I think there’s value in following our students to college and seeing how they’re performing maybe in their first or second semester of college after they leave us or the other piece is following their employment a year or 2 years out.

Respondent 2B suggested such efforts and partnerships would allow for districts to pinpoint where potential gaps are in their current college and career readiness programs. Thus, opportunities for revitalization of plausibly outdated initiatives could happen.

**Assessments.** Of the six participants, Respondents 1A, 1B, 2B, and 3B indicated assessments should be targeted for improving student learning. Essentially, the majority,

or 67%, of the participants, shared congruent perspectives when addressing: utilizing student assessments as a formative measure to improve student performance. These four believed assessments should be administered with intent and as a means to improve the learning experience of students and viewed assessments as a potential two-fold instrument. They expressed the need to utilize assessments as a method of preparing students for the future, while simultaneously gauging potential re-teach opportunities. There seemed to be a common thread of disdain toward cumulatively assessing students by way of one end of the year assessment measure.

In describing the current sentiment on student accountability and assessment, Respondent 1A elaborated that “the problem with both of these assessments is the way they assess kids is so traditional that it doesn’t allow teaching to be innovative.” In reflection to cumulative EOCs, Respondent 1B stated that “looking at it after the fact: It’s like an autopsy, as opposed to being more preventative.” Respondent 2B conveyed,

When we think student progress, we are thinking of assessment results and how those students are moving forward. I know one area that we’re looking into is some norm-referenced assessments, some nationally norm-referenced assessments to administer at all grade levels, so that we have not just a single test that, essentially, we spend a year preparing our students for, but using that data that statistically is tied to success at that higher levels.

Respondent 2B added the following details:

I think, successfully measuring learning can come with assessment, whether it be state assessment, whether it be norm-referenced assessments, whether it be

college-board assessments. I do believe focusing more on a progress measure rather than just a set achievement score is where our superintendents can be held accountable for, having high expectations, and meeting the organizations forward, not just having to meet a minimum score on an assessment.

The four participants aired strong sentiments about utilizing assessments for progress monitoring in order to continuously adjust instruction to improve student learning. They frowned upon the heightened focus on end-of-year assessments by the state because these assessments offered limited measures of learning among each district's multiple student populations. Additionally, these four participants noted the state lacked innovation when requiring districts to integrate work readiness components into curricula for enabling students to become college and workforce ready successfully.

**Student growth.** Of the six participants, Respondents 1A, 1B, 2A, 3A and 3B expressed the importance and emphasis on student growth for all student population groups served in their districts. These five participants shared positive views of ESSA with its push toward shared accountability. They perceived ESSA to be an opportunity for districts to increase learning opportunities and implement innovative strategies to prepare students to become college and become workforce ready. These participants described measuring student growth in the accountability system with creativity as important and value added.

These participants shared the need to increase dialogue and collaboration between the state and school districts to heighten the focus on student growth measurements for indicators of instructional effectiveness. Respondent 1A suggested creating collaborative

partnerships by opening “two-way communication” of shared interactions with the state that leads to increased student achievement. For Respondent 2A, “The value piece or growth piece is a statistical analysis of the data with regard to student achievement and the conversations that follow the data analysis to create targeted instructional practices that result in growth.” Respondent 3B posed, in regard to ESSA, growth, and shared accountability, the need for “making sure that we’re available for all students. But also, it’s asking that we determine what students are meeting, whether they show growth; it creates a push toward communication, reflection, and targeted instruction.” Essentially, the participants spoke with a sense of urgency about the need for the state to show interesting valuing academic growth among all students.

The participants shared observations and reflections of their school districts and strategic measures taken to ensure all students are provided with opportunities and interventions to increase growth and academic achievement. The newly adopted domain-driven accountability system adopted by Texas supports the desired perspectives of the participants included in the study. Respondent 1B said, “The part that I am excited about, in both domains, in one and two, I feel like we need to really hone in on the student growth aspect of the accountability system.” To meet ESSA’s expectations and guidelines, the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2018) adopted an A-F accountability system which contains a student growth related domain, known as school progress. This accountability domain will be used specifically to monitor academic indicators designed to compare the relative achievement of student groups across similar student demographics (TEA, 2018).



**Achievement gap and equity.** As the participants shared their perspectives on student performance, emphasis was expressed regarding the districts responsibility to ensure closing of achievement gaps and equity by more than half of the participants, four of the six participants. These participants included Respondent 1B, 2A, 2B, and 3B. The importance in the current accountability shift regarding closing of achievement gaps was voiced by Respondent 1B:

If you have 90% of your students [who] are economically disadvantaged, or 2 to 3 years behind in learning, what are you doing for that campus that you're not doing for this high achiever? I think establishing the guidelines for equity is important.

Respondent 2A noted when the children arrive in the school district "at 4 years old, and they know 300 words, and in other districts, those children show up knowing 3,000 words, it's real tough for us to catch them up by third grade." This was one example of the need to provide learning opportunities that close achievement gaps for minority and economically disadvantaged children. Respondent 3A shared the following sentiments:

Two out of three of our students are African-American or Hispanic, and demonstrating that there is excellence and growth and achievement in every sector I think is important. If I could change the school accountability, I would expand the definition of what is quality and what is achievement beyond test taking.

Respondent 1B offered the greatest amount of data regarding gaps and equity and explained that by assessing students "summatively, you are perpetuating these gaps in

learning or these achievement gaps.” Respondent 1B added “that achievement gaps exist in our country when we look at our minority student performance, when you compare them to other student groups.” Moreover, for Respondent 1B, schools “pass on students that may have some gaps in their learning, that, maybe if we had a more formative approach to accountability we could make adjustments along the way.” Equity in compulsory access to quality instruction was clearly a concern for Respondent 3B: “Equity between students and schools, and the access that students may have so that they can meet that accountability with the best instruction from teachers within that district.” The shared perspectives of these four participants, particularly from Respondent 1B, expressed positive regard toward making progress in closing of achievement gaps across all student groups, but they remained concerned about strategies for efficiently closing these gaps.

### **Policy and Governance**

The second theme policy and governance revealed the importance that school superintendents as well as deputy superintendents believed to be key characteristics in the role of the superintendent. All six of the participant shared their perspectives on leadership and governance responsibilities of state and local superintendent leaders.

Respondent 1B provided detailed thoughts:

When we come out of legislation, we always get these strange things that come our way.... Why don't you [legislators] talk to the superintendents before we go into session? Solicit feedback, because it has such valuable knowledge that can

inform policy-making. If it's a multi-collaborative process, I think it's less divisive, and we work together to make sure the whole system works well.

The theme developed from how the participants understood the superintendency and the role of the state and local school districts in providing clarity, consistency, and ownership in the vision for educating students within their communities. Governance resonated as an engaged partnership between state and local entities as articulated by Respondent 3B: "I still believe that shared accountability means that we're all responsible for students in learning and I do believe that there should be a framework that says you will increase learning, students will be prepared for college."

Respondent 2B mirrored Respondent 3B's perspective: "I, personally, believe that school districts shouldn't just say, 'This is what we want to report.' I think engaging the community, but, then, getting that feedback on what you consider holding your school accountable." The participants clearly voiced a heightened sense of shared accountability between the state and the local stakeholders within the school districts. Respondent 2B noted that "the problem is measuring learning, and especially from superintendents leading the process," because all learning cannot "be quantified; there is some level of qualitative data, some level of districts submitting evidence and whether that evidence is community-based surveys, whether that evidence is the impact that we see in the community, partnerships with our local community." All six participants expressed the same perspective on the importance of empowering their communities to provide input about developing district achievement goals and locally developed student assessments that promote the vision for their district.

The participants also viewed the role of the superintendents as leaders and advocates that ensure a clear and aligned vision with all community stakeholders within their school districts. The participants appreciated the collaboration and development of targeted student achievement goals within their communities. Participants suggested district goals and assessment of student achievement is best developed locally with their community stakeholders and development of a clear vision.

**State accountability.** Four out of the six participants, Respondents 1A, 1B, 2A, and 3A shared strong beliefs in establishing minimum state requirements for guiding local districts' governance of student performance. The resounding sentiment was that Texas's A-F educational accountability framework meets the requirements set forth by ESSA. Although the participants expressed that a minimum ceiling should be identified by the state education agency, they shared mixed beliefs about the degree to which state mandated assessments should override local school districts' assessments used to measure student academic performance for accountability purposes. The superintendents and deputy superintendents who discussed this theme presented strong advocacy toward ensuring that the state consider the multiple difference across school districts in Texas when determining the assessment selection for a more personalized approach to sharing the responsibility of student performance and accountability.

Strong advocacy for the state to set minimum standards for student performance was presented by Respondent 2A who expressed:

The state should require a set of standards, a minimum set of standards to meet. I believe that the state should require that districts prove up that we are teaching to

those standards. And that we are making every effort to take every child as far as we can take that child.

Similar support for the state deciding the instructional framework was described by Respondent 1A thought “the state is trying their best to follow what needs to be done.” State requirements add consistency across all districts, according to Respondent 2B who expressed, “having that one consistent measure across the state so that we can benchmark. ... The state should have some level of control because, without accountability, you are going to have districts that are going to work the system.”

As the participants discussed the shift toward local accountability control from federal to state oversight, they shared the desire to find the right balance in sharing the accountability for student performance between the state and their local school districts. As evidenced by the shared sentiment for shared accountability, Respondent 3A who stated, “I think again, partnership. I mean I think the state should establish what the goals are, and what passing is, then work with the locals to have multiple ways to achieve that.” For Respondent 1B, “I believe in the system, you have to have some type of over-arching expectation from the state because otherwise, every district would have established their own. You know, they have their own idea of what accountability should be. So, I think once that’s established at the state level, superintendents then, I think it’s good for them to have input, right, because they’re the ones carrying out this work.” Respondent 3A alludes to a balanced control of shared accountability by the state and local school districts in developing and implementing instructional frameworks that best support their community needs by stating, “The state shouldn’t decide everything, but neither should

the superintendents. I mean it should be a collaborative endeavor whereby interests of both and really all of the student groups are reflected.” In sum, the six participants wanted the state to allow local districts to be the responsible agents for determining overarching academic expectations and to be empowered in the implementation of the A-F system based on the state’s baseline expectations.

**Clear Expectations, Clarity, and Understanding.** Discussion regarding the impact of the shift in the accountability framework raised comments by four of the six participants, who were Respondent 1A, 1B, 2A, and 3B, regarding clarity and concerns pertaining to the understanding of the changes from upon by ESSA and the state’s plan to implement this new legislation. The responses from the participants conveyed a nebulous understanding of expectations and clarity regarding the accountability measures imposed by the state’s A-F framework derived from the accountability shift with ESSA. The participants shared frustration and challenges in their ability to fully explain the accountability changes to their community stakeholders as shared by Respondent 3B:

We don’t even know what the measurement is because we have a new assessment. We’re looking at a new accountability rating system; we’re looking at new standards and what constitutes those standards. So I think we don’t have a consistent measurement, I don’t think we have a consistent understanding of what we’re going to be held accountable for. I believe mixed messages have been sent to schools districts. So, I can see confusion and inconsistency, is what I see.”

Respondent 3B added:

But it does concern me because we still don't know, it hasn't been released so that we know what the A through F rating actually means. So, we're still trying to chase a moving target, and there's not a clear understanding. I believe that they are set to release the rubric for that. But it's not been released, so I don't think that anyone has a clear understanding because we haven't been given what that grading range is going to be.

Respondent 1A said the A-F state accountability framework “gets so convoluted” because of the following:

When you're out there trying to explain it, that you realize that we've created a system that is very hard to comprehend. When the public can't comprehend it, then they're going to turn around and say that sounds real complicated.

Obviously, they're not doing a good job. They'll just look at the score that you get, without any understanding of what the truth is.

Participants conveyed a strong sense of responsibility to their communities in being able to maintain trust and support of the accountability occurring across the state, Respondent 2A shared, “Support from the school board, trust, keeping the focus on the big picture, keeping your focus on the mountains and not the grain of sand in your shoe, establishing clear expectations of the governance team and having the government's team agree on it and hold each other accountable.” Similarly, Respondent 1B expressed, “Consistency, establish what the expectations are and being consistent and also making sure, once you establish those expectations, that everyone can achieve these goals.” The participants did share accolades for the state's efforts in providing training to school

officials and board members in better understanding the shift in the accountability system. Respondent 1A discussed as follows:

I think the state has done a great job of putting the demands on board members to be educated and astute on all instructional aspects of the school district. I think the second part to that, I applaud their efforts, is that there's mandatory trainings, and a mandatory focus now that needs to happen with board members, so that way the majority of the decision are based on the instructional needs of the student. What needs to continue is the hyper focus on instructional needs through conversations with constituents on celebrating achievements, with ensuring that the public understands that the organization is built for student academic success. Everything else supplements that. Whether its structures, whether it's some sort of organizational chart to adequately staff, all of that should supplement instruction.

Although the superintendent and deputy superintendents shared their accolades for mandatory training events for school boards and district leaders, they expressed mixed sentiments regarding their ability to successfully articulate the changes in the accountability system to their constituents.

**Local accountability.** In reviewing the transcripts, the superintendents and deputy superintendents articulated strong intent towards shifting greater control to the local school districts in determining the measures for student performance. Four out of the six participants, who were Respondents 1A, 2B, 3A, and 3B, indicated the greater shift in the accountability system should be a movement toward control by local school



districts. Respondent 3A noted the “shift toward local control, [and] the ultimate pass-fail letter grade is still done at the state level, and I think that there could be some opportunity for more dialogue in terms of defining what truly is measured, and how.”

Similarly, Respondent 3B shared:

As a teacher, I don’t believe that the state should have control. I believe that’s where local control should be applied. However, I do believe if we don’t have some sort of accountability, I don’t believe all districts will be equal in how they implement and how they’re holding themselves accountable for students being successful academically.

Respondent 2B expressed a request for the state to enable local districts to have greater voice in the accountability system as follows:

I do see the value in the state having an evaluation of what we’re reporting, so that it’s not total control at the district level, still being accountable for these minimum pieces there and those kinds of things, but, as far as developing the measures, if we have to break it down to a letter grade, I think we should get to have majority of the voice.

The superintendent and district leader participants expressed that local districts have greater knowledge of their community needs and as such should have greater ability to differentiate how they prepare students for college and the workforce. Respondent 2B expressed this level of knowledge in detail:

I think the superintendents should have a large voice in developing those measures, but, again, it really would be more so the superintendents would be

reporting those measures based on expectations from their school board from their community. But, definitely, having that voice and having that input because the superintendents know what they're doing. We know what efforts we're making within our district and we want to be able to have the state recognize a lot of those things.

Respondent 3A shared similar remarks about wanting the district to have the ability to personalize student performance measures locally by stating the following:

We believe that it is equally valuable to walk out of high school work-ready with industry certifications and licenses and go into the work force and that every child should not go to college and incur college debt. So I would definitely move toward a local accountability system being of greater weight than a state accountability system.

The passage of House Bill 22 in 2017 by the 85th Texas Legislature added an uplifting sense of hope that local school districts could share a greater amount of responsibility in designing and assessing student performance. Respondent 2B explicated:

What we've been operating under, for at least the last, what, 13, 14 years, has been focused all on performance on a single assessment. It doesn't account for the totality of what we do as a district and so, the new system that we're transitioning to, as a state, is more representative, but, still, doesn't encompass what we do on a daily basis. So, as far as my proposal, I love how House Bill 22

brought in the opportunity for us to develop a local accountability system and add pieces that more encompass us as a district.

The participants interviewed articulated their desire to extend a tighter partnership and increase their shared accountability with the state as to where school districts gain more control to create personalized student performance measures for their student body based on the individualized local needs of each community. Respondent 1A conveyed:

What limits us is that the state is driven by legislative directives. If the stage agency was able to truly partnership with school districts to create a learning experience for kids and measure it in authentic ways, I believe that we have the capacity to do that.

The increase in local voice and control was also voiced by Respondent 2B, “I do believe that there needs to be some level of control from the state, but at the same token, I think that school districts should have a voice in how the state regulates or potentially what they do.” In explaining how greater local control could be successfully implemented by local school districts, Respondent 3B shared a very clear process for incorporating the voice of all the stakeholders in determining the student performance measures of their students:

I think number one; you would have to actually have to do community forum so that you get stakeholder input. I think that you’d have to work with all different types of stakeholders to do a strategic plan so that everyone has input and so that it’s clearly communicated and also so that you can get a feel of what your stakeholders, your parents, your students, your teachers, your community leaders

want and need for their businesses. If that plan is put together, work together, and there's a common vision, and everyone has the same understanding of how we get there, and how we meet those needs. I think it has a very positive effect. I think if everyone is on the same page of what the stakes, the accountability will be and how they'll be measured, I think that's the role of the superintendent, is to ensure that they're properly put in place and then I think you'd have a very, very positive effect on the stakeholders and the community leaders and school.

The participants made strong arguments for transferring from the state to the local districts higher autonomy for accountability control. Through their discussions, these four participants expressed their strong desires to involve their local board members and community stakeholders in determining the assessment measures they would use to provide the best learning and growth opportunities for their students. It was evident that the participants, who are governed by their respective school boards, thoughtfully embrace and value the perspectives their board members and communities find important.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

The third theme to evolve by five of the six participant interviews was curriculum and instruction. Through the vivid discussion from Respondents 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, and 3B, the repetitive theme around the design of curriculum, instructional innovation and development of authentic assessments arose. The five participants conveyed the desire to create aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessments that best aligned with preparing students for college and workforce readiness demands. In relating to how school district

leaders should demonstrate student progress as it pertains to curriculum and instruction, Respondent 2A shared if the state “would give us the information we need to become more prescriptive with regard to our curriculum, our staff development, our student intervention.” Respondent 1A’s perspective regarding the state’s involvement was the following:

When they say they need to do the reading, science, math, there’s no innovation in it. It’s just about the testing procedure. In the setting the standards, and you’re giving everybody access to a comprehensive education, you’re not really calibrating the whole system.

The participants argued that preparing students for workforce and college readiness requires school districts to create learning environments that incorporate content beyond the scope and sequence of TEKS. Respondent 1B articulated, “how do we make sure that, by the time they finish this pre-K through 12 system, we’ve built students that are career, college, military ready, if we don’t look at each one as an individual.” Respondent 3B agreed with this sentiment: “Equity between students and schools, and the access that students may have so that they can meet that accountability with the best instruction from teachers within that district. ... I don’t know that there’s clear alignment there.” The participants discussed collaboration with higher education institutions, businesses in their communities, and external partnerships as an integral part of developing a more robust curriculum that encompasses and embraces a tighter alignment with workforce readiness and higher education expectations.

**Innovation and authentic assessment.** The subtheme of innovation and authentic assessments was described by five of the six participants. Respondents 1A, 2A, 2B, 3A, and 3B discussed desires to develop innovative and authentic assessments that best engage the student learning experience with 21st century problem solving across curricular themes. Respondent 3A expressed that “some of the things I’m talking about measuring are not necessarily bubble sheets and, you know, filling out forms” and clarified the thought as follows:

I mean the process of identifying what the challenge is, of researching it, of articulating what your solution is, of presenting it to others, those are all of the skills that kids need. Kids don’t need, problems don’t come at them in linear worksheets. You know, problems are, problem solving in the world of work and the world outside of schools is about critical thinking and complex connections and communication and judgment and if there were a way to develop a measure that touches upon those things that can be done in an effective and efficient way, then I think we’d be a lot better off.

Respondent 1A suggested using an “authentic measuring system that gauges a child’s growth in reading, in numeracy, in problem solving abilities, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be a multiple-choice test.” Respondent 3B conveyed concern about whether the current accountability measures are “really measuring whether a kid can go to college and be successful in college. I don’t know that there’s clear alignment there. I think the measurement more should be on college prep and what colleges and university needs.” The congruence concerns evident in these five participants’ responses involved

requesting that the state “assess the students’ problem solving utilizing local assessments across inter-disciplinary work,” as said best by Respondent 1A. Essentially, these five participants believed that students would be more prepared and able to reach college and workforce readiness if they were engaged in innovative and authentic learning experiences that integrated problem-solving across multiple disciplines and required using 21st century learning skills.

**Curriculum design for 21st century instructional practices.** Five out six participants valued their ability to create innovative curriculum and create locally developed assessments that best fit the needs of their school community. The core of this theme developed from Respondents 1A, 1B, 2A, 3A, and 3B discussing the impact of real world experiences on student learning. As Respondent 3B conveyed when describing curriculum as the district’s top priority:

I think that superintendents work with their teams and look at a needs assessment and they see where the areas and opportunities to improve student learning are and that they set goals around those areas. Their job, their number one focus, should be putting curriculum resources, putting instructional leaders, putting campus leaders in place to improve those standards. If it is reading in elementary, if it is middle-years math, if it is preparing kids for college and career readiness, it is actually putting in the resources.

When referring to curriculum design Respondent 1B did not view instruction as “a one-size-fits-all” and believed instruction could be customized “with still high expectations or some consistent expectations across the board so that we don’t see

districts kind of choosing what they want and maybe taking the easy way out.” For example, Respondent 3A valued the importance in students having the “ability to communicate, ability to problem solve, ability to think critically, ability to overcome obstacles, to be resilient, to be collaborative.” Respondent 1A would do the following:

Look at what the 21st century learner is set out to do. From there, then I would say if this is the goal of the 21st century learner, then how do we create an authentic accountability system that would measure that expectation? I would design from there down. Because once you design what the expectation is, you start setting what I would call benchmarks on what we want to measure each year. Respondent 3B expressed the need for a tighter alignment with higher education, “I think there needs to be a closer alignment between districts and higher ed[ucation] practices so that students are successful, and we’re bridging that gap.”

The participants’ desire to incorporate innovative curriculum appeared throughout the interviews. Respondent 1A shared, “21st century literacy also includes [software] coding, right? All the problem solving skills that come with those type of things.” Designing a 21st century curriculum that incorporates the problem solving skills required by the workforce was a priority for the participants as conveyed by Respondents 1A and 3A. Respondent 1A shared:

What better way of doing that through, like I said, simulated experiences. In that, it’s all encompassing. You’re dealing with your soft skills. You’re dealing with your problem-solving skills. You’re integrating the core content areas like real life does. Those type of things can be really interactive, and then gauge how kids



are doing. If you have these simulations, what you can actually do, instead of just doing the one-size-fits-all, you can have them do that on a quarterly basis and see if they're improving or not. You can measure kids based on their engagement levels, with whatever program you give them.

Similarly Respondent 3A maintained the need for:

The process of identifying real world challenges is, researching it, articulating what your solution is, and presenting it to others. Those are all of the skills that kids need in the real world. Kids don't need problems that come at them in linear worksheets. You know, problems are, problem solving in the world of work and the world outside of schools is about critical thinking and complex connections, communication and judgment. If there were a way to develop a measure that touches upon those things that can be done in an effective and efficient way, then I think we'd be a lot better off.

Throughout their dialogue, these five participants were highly vocal about incorporating 21st century instructional practices into curriculum. Their enthusiasm for providing learning opportunities that mirror college and real-world environments was clearly articulated. They used this need to justify their rationales for encouraging the state to change its required instructional and assessment practices. The participants shared the desire to have deeper discussions across the state and between school districts for reviewing the state standards as aligning PK-16, or more specifically, how well K-12 standards align to needs by higher education institutions for college readiness and by businesses for workforce preparedness.

## **Findings for the Research Questions**

While students are the main beneficiaries of quality instruction, superintendents and deputy superintendents are charged with leading complex learning organizations. The students and district leaders are, therefore, key members within their school districts. Investigating the phenomenon that exists in relation to how superintendents and school leaders experience and understand shifts in the accountability system was paramount to this research. The researcher set out to find meaning on the current shift in the accountability system and unexplored territory in the literature. To fulfill the research purpose, the three main questions led to a procedural structure for the investigation of meaning from the lived experiences and perspectives of the superintendents and deputy superintendents. The themes as answers to the research questions are presented here.

### **Research Question 1: What are perspectives of district leaders within the shift from a state-imposed accountability system to shared accountability in Texas?**

The first research question examined the core of group of district leaders' perspectives as it pertains to the shift in the school accountability system. This group was represented by superintendents and deputy superintendents. When first discussing a design for this research, several education colleagues suggested superintendents would likely have limited input to represent the changes that are occurring in real time relating to the shift in the new accountability system. The sample included superintendents and deputy superintendents who could assuredly demonstrate some connectivity to the shift in the accountability system.

There were varying degrees of perspectives as to whether the legislation needs more local control. The district leaders presented how they experience and understand the shift in the school accountability system as impacting their districts. Respondent 3A expressed the need for further discussion about the “shift toward local control. The ultimate pass/fail letter grade is still done at the state level, and I think that there could be some opportunity for more dialogue in terms of defining what truly is measured, and how.” Respondent 1A presented an optimistic perspective about the shift in accountability control even while remaining skeptical about school districts remaining anchored to a selected menu of accountability choices.

The six participants expressed their collective belief that the current accountability shift offered an opportunity for greater local governance to determine and select the curricula and assessments best suited to meet the needs of their student populations. As identified by the participants within the policy and governance theme, the participants shared that ESSA (2015) offered a great opportunity to engage in more meaningful dialogue with the state as it pertains to having greater autonomy in selecting accountability criteria at the local level due to their desires to meet their communities’ needs. The participants noted Texas’ subsequent law, House Bill 22 (2017), provided the opportunity to design local forms of accountability. Respondent 1A understood that the superintendent has the responsibility, as both leader and visionary, to provide educational opportunities to the students based on community needs and local school district input from its stakeholders. Respondent 1A concluded:

When you start looking at a shift of local control and accountability with House Bill 22, it's more of a choice, right? It's either A or B. It's not full control. It's not like you can create your own assessment system and say this is what we're going to measure ourselves with. It's really just you have now a menu of choices. The choices are still limiting. While I think it's a vast improvement on what we've done before, there's a long way to go to get authentic feedback on where our kids are at.

Additionally, the participants were leaders critical to the implementation for meeting compliance piece set forth in ESSA. The participants shared a common perspective of optimism and hope for better serving their students based on recent legislation. Though they maintained positive outlooks, they clearly called for clarity from the state regarding the guidelines about the new accountability policies and criteria. Each participant displayed a strong desire to implement ESSA with fidelity, while remaining hopeful this shift in the newly adopted accountability system would benefit their districts at large with a focus in meeting the needs of the populations of students represented within the school communities.

**Research Question 2: How would district leaders of urban districts define the movement toward local control?**

The second research question investigated the meaning and impact associated with how district leaders perceive the movement towards local control. As previously characterized, four out of the six participating superintendents and deputy superintendents described a greater shift towards local control as positively impactful.

The participants reflected on the prior accountability systems, most recently NCLB, and shared hopefulness that the state's interpretation of ESSA would increase the two-way communication in defining student performance both at the state and local school district levels. Participants described being motivated by the recent passage of House Bill 22 and hoped to become more involved with the state decision making and conversation happening at the state level.

Participants viewed the superintendent as holding a leadership position for guiding their local communities toward determining what assessments of learning and growth in students they value and use. Respondent 2A preferred the following recourse:

If I had the magic accountability wand, I would return local control to our school boards, and that's important in a number of ways. One is, so much has been taken away from the local boards. Often local boards are looking for things to control and sometimes that results in poor governance. I would heavily weigh the accountability system with regard to a school district setting meeting, exceeding, pushing, growing, re-meeting, exceeding local goals, and local expectations.

In sum, the participants shared a sense of hopefulness with the implementation of ESSA and its shared accountability. The participants shared futuristic visions and provided evidence of excitement for gaining the autonomy of structuring educational opportunities under a more holistic approach while offering targeted instruction aimed at minimizing the current student achievement gaps. Value was placed by all participants on ensuring that compulsory high-quality learning takes place in every classroom for every student.

### **Research Question 3: How do school leaders envision a plan of action for shared accountability?**

The district leaders interviewed shared their enthusiasm while describing how to implement shared accountability through various forms. In regard to student performance, four out of the six participants shared the desire to include multiple forms of “real world” assessments that mimic the requirements in higher education and the workforce. Of added importance was the request for school districts to utilize their local community needs to bridge a plan with the state. The participants valued the voice of their school boards and ability to select and design more “authentic” assessments that incorporate 21st century learning skills and problem-solving skills.

Though filled with ambiguity with the newness of ESSA, the participants expressed optimism in moving forward. The participants have been working to devise plans of actions even without detailed guidance from the state. Most participants discussed the need for easily comprehensible outlines and governing guidelines to assist campus based leaders responsible for the implementation of the measures used due to the accountability shift. Participants currently were moving to the drawing board of collaboration with state level officials and superintendent cabinets to facilitate crucial targeted conversations and action plans.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4 the findings described how the six district leaders perceive and understand the shift in the accountability system. The research design was purposefully aligned with strategies designed to investigate the perspectives and lived experiences of

the participants interviewed. In the narratives presented, the frequencies of the participants' data within the identified themes appeared. The data coding cycles and analysis used to cluster the themes were explained. The evolving themes and their supporting foundations were displayed in Table 2.

The perspectives and lived experiences of the participants led the narrative in supporting the creation of three themes. Three themes evolved from the six district leaders' experiences with the shift in the accountability system that impact the following: (a) student performance, (b) policy and governance, and (c) shift in curriculum and instruction. The researcher concluded by merging the study data with the three research questions to generate focused findings and provide explanation as to how district leaders experience and understand the shift in the accountability system and how that understanding impacts their local school districts.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Achievement gaps have plagued the nation's public education system since its conception. As previously cited by *A Nation at Risk* (1983), public schools in America have struggled to close the achievement gaps that affect students of color and economically disadvantaged students. Educators have expressed discord with curriculum design that has been based on accountability assessments; limits the learning experiences of students; and hinders teachers from designing individualized, innovative learning environments in which students are educated by a holistic approach (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002). In an effort to bridge and minimize the prevalent nationwide student achievement gaps, ESSA (2015) has guidelines that allow states and their school districts to focus on the needs of all their students district by district. States and districts gain greater power to take into account the variance of circumstances and backgrounds among school children as they consider locally designed accountability measures. The accountability system in Texas offers school districts opportunities to locally control how to close the achievement gaps for all students regardless of racial group, special education status, and socioeconomic status (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2018). Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore and understand school leaders' perspectives about school accountability shift towards shared accountability in Texas and their beliefs on the role of local control as school districts are graded by the state. This chapter concludes the study by summarizing the study procedures and findings, using a discussion to connect the findings to the explicated theories, providing



implications for the findings to practice, and offering recommendations for future study. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

### **Summary of the Study and Findings**

Previous studies had not investigated any connection between superintendents, district leaders and their experiences in relation to the shift from NCLB to ESSA. This study explored how district leaders experience and understand the shift in the accountability system in order to address the absence of scholarly research on the topic. This investigation utilized phenomenological methodology to develop emic-oriented themes. The researcher interviewed six district leaders, who were three superintendents and three deputy superintendents, from urban public school districts experiencing the national and state student accountability shift currently impacting all public education stakeholders. The participants selected from three public urban school districts represented varying years of experience that led to rich, in-depth face-to-face interviews. The Lasky (2004), Bolman and Deal (2008) and Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) conceptual frameworks enabled the researcher to analyze data and gain deeper meanings from the interviews. The emergent themes established a foundation for how district leaders experience and understand the shift in the accountability system. The lived experiences of the six participants were categorized into 13 original cluster groupings, and then further distilled into three emergent themes.

The findings revealed three themes relating to how district leaders experience and understand the shift in the accountability system as follows: (a) student performance, (b) policy and governance, and (c) curriculum and instruction. The participants experiencing

the current accountability shift posed deep reflections about their ability to articulate the changes along with implications to their stakeholders. District leaders understood the shift in the accountability system as an opportunity to experience balance in shared accountability between state and local school districts. The participants articulated a sense of ownership in defining and creating the student assessments that would be used to determine their respective A-F ratings and in promoting their school districts to their communities. Discussing the impact in this accountability shift, the district leaders indicated they had become more involved with their constituents, desired to empower all their stakeholders in the development and implementation of the accountability framework and hoped for continued clarity on the state's implementation of the ESSA plan. They believed communication between the local school districts and state education agency can be impactful to student learning environments.

### **Discussion**

The following discussion is designed to clarify and support the findings of this study. Chapter 2 discussed addressed a foundation of literature for positioning the study within existing frameworks of existing literature involving policy, ideologies, structures and communication linkages (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Conceptual frameworks by Bolman and Deal (2008), Lasky (2004), and Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) provided multiple lenses for explaining organizational behavior including complex public school systems. This research exploring how district leaders experience and understand shifts in accountability systems has highlighted parallels between the findings and the identified frameworks to suggest study implications.

The first theme exemplified student performance and paralleled the research-based assertion of ideological linkages, which encompass the values and beliefs of the school districts' community members. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) noted "the ideological linkage, addressing both end goals and means, provides the foundation on which to build school reform, enhance professional commitment, and improve student achievement (p. 770)."

The superintendents' and deputy superintendents' values and beliefs validated the importance of ensuring that ideological differences between the state education agency and the local district leaders are discussed and addressed for strengthening the development, roll out, and implementation of ESSA expectations and guidelines. All participants in the study shared perspectives expressing a desire for autonomy and empowerment for selecting appropriate student assessments for their local communities' and students' needs. Respondent 3A acknowledged the need for "checks and balances. The state shouldn't decide everything, but neither should the superintendents. I mean, it should be a collaborative endeavor whereby interests of both and really all of the student groups are reflected." Similarly, Respondent 1B articulated the need for districts' leaders "to have some voice as to how would we want to look at it in this district, because we know our student population is different than another district, and we our student needs are different." These statements represent the acknowledgement of linkages between agencies.

Lasky (2004) described the federal government's educational policy as one of the most *robust* and *enduring linkages* in contrast to educational systems from around the

world. Even with NCLB and ESSA, Lasky (2004) explained, educational policy can be both structural and progressive. The relational linkages may affect the development of federal education policies that have led to redesigning various aspects of schooling and accountability (Jennings, 2003). The federal government has changed the education system through policy mandates subsequent to *A Nation at Risk*'s publication (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Federal educational policy has historically established significant linkages between public schooling systems as a top-down educational policy, and more noticeably, "the standards and accountability systems developed over the last decade are perhaps the most prominent linkages among federal, state, district, and school policy domains" (Lasky, 2004, p. 8). Importantly, Lasky's references to "symmetric accountability" as part of sharing responsibility for school improvement efforts among "students, teachers, administrators, researchers, and policymakers" appear to have prophesied the current shift in accountability evolving from 2015's ESSA (Lasky, 2004, p. 8).

It is interesting that Lasky's (2004) assertion of a lack of evidence for sanction-oriented accountability systems, established without funding for programs to build capacity among educators, successfully improving student learning on standardized assessments. The current findings appear to support Lasky's postulations.

Previously, the Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) framework was discussed in Chapter 2; however, the data showed a stronger association to Lasky's (2004) structural linkages conceptual framework. Lasky described the conceptual framework seen in Figure 2 as follows:

It maps the structural, formal and informal, ideological, relational, and temporal linkages throughout the education policy system. This model includes the possibility for nonlinear movement and unpredictability across the policy system; it also shows the messiness and complexity inherent in policy and reform implementation. There is, however, no statistical model sophisticated enough to analyze the multiple and simultaneous influences affecting any single outcome.

(p. 24)

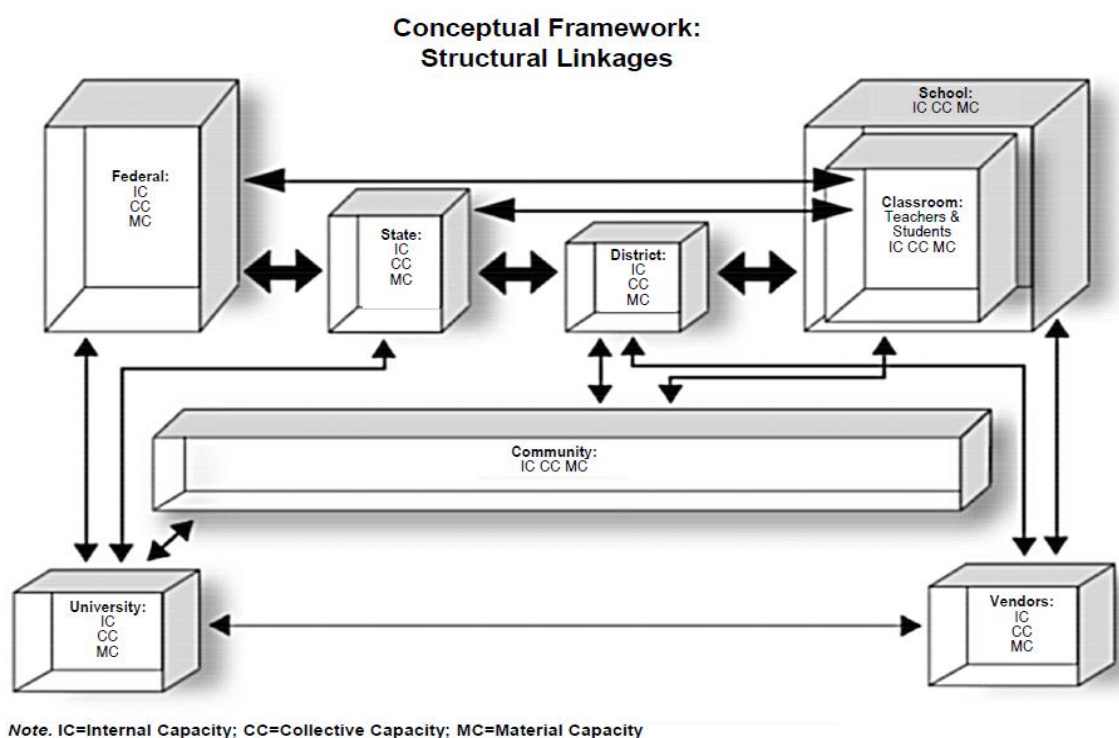


Figure 2. Lasky (2004) structural linkages conceptual framework.

Similar to Lasky's (2004) postulations, the participants shared similar narratives describing frustration with top-down initiatives and anticipation for shifting to a shared accountability system that provides them with greater autonomy and empowerment. Several participants in the study attributed gaining increased positive interactions

between the state and their school district to the passage of ESSA and HB 22. All six participants highlighted the importance of addressing their local communities' needs. The participants' commentary indicated important value in creating genuine assessments that address their communities' needs. This linkage bears a stronger relationship to Lasky's model which sets the community at the center. The community linkage then supports that a public school superintendent's ability to form a sense of belonging within the school district is an important factor for motivation and success. Also, the discussion of interaction with the state legislature and education agency by the participants, as evidenced by their shared experiences and perspectives, again shows a direct association to Lasky that was not anticipated at the outset of this research. Finally, the culmination of their responses provided evidence that student performance is a highly valued and integral component of their work.

The second theme of policy and governance evolving from the study's data centered on how the district leaders understood the impact of the current shift in the accountability system. The findings did show linkages to all three frameworks by Bolman and Deal (2008), Lasky (2004), and Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) frameworks for credibility. The superintendents' discussed establishing clear visions for their school districts and collaborating with their school boards and communities, which supported the assertions found in all three frameworks.

Evidence from five of the six participants showed local governance and identification of student performance criteria should be integral in all interactivity with the state for developing student performance measures that reflect the notion of shared

accountability. This evidence represented aspects of Lasky's (2004) framework suggesting that states and local school districts should take an active, collaborative partnership in developing, choosing, and coordinating their accountability system.

Evidence of this linkage to theory was expected by Respondent 2B:

I love the purpose behind House Bill 22. I know there was a lot of warp [i.e., distortion] put into developing it and evolving it through the legislative session. It was driven more so by an intent to allow school districts to tell their story and to be accountable to the communities. Again, back on that local accountability, I, personally, believe that school districts shouldn't just say, "This is what we want to report." I think engaging the community, but, then, getting that feedback on what you consider holding your school accountable.

Participants also shared narratives indicating their desires for the state to work cooperatively with them in sharing the responsibility for student performance accountability. Respondent 2B who had reported "love" for House Bill 22, noted the bill did the following:

Brought in the opportunity for us to develop a local accountability system and add pieces that more encompass us as a district. So, my proposal is bringing and not even making an option for a district, but even maybe a required piece, is sit down with our school boards, sit down with our community and ask them how they want our schools to be accountable and develop measures for how we can report to the public on those additional pieces.

Openly discussing and debating accountability within structured supports and environments was viewed by the participants as an effort to promote collaboration and a stronger sense of shared accountability reflecting the uniqueness of each school district. These structures, for Lasky (2004), ensure dynamic change can happen by bridging ideological chasms through communication by stakeholders at all levels.

The third theme that evolved from the interview data was curriculum and instruction. Participants echoed each other with desires to influence state curriculum and assessment design to incorporate 21st century skills and create assessments more aligned with higher education and real world expectations. The participants hoped for greater autonomy in determining the curricular and assessment needs of their school districts based on their local communities' needs. Most looked forward to a shared accountability model with mutually accountable responsibilities to increase the community investment in student learning. Respondent 3B summarized the theme with this evidence:

I still believe that shared accountability means that we're all responsible for students in learning, and I do believe that there should be a framework that says, "you will increase learning, students will be prepared for college," but I believe that the implementation of what that looks like should have local control from the standpoint of giving us opportunity to be innovative in what we do and how we implement that.

The district leaders regarded the state as the manager of student learning. With this in mind, all six participants viewed the state as the governing agency and wanted the state to allow for two-way shared accountability, autonomy, and empowerment while developing



curriculum and assessments better aligned with 21st century learning skills and workplace requirements.

Finally, the notable tie to Bolman and Deal (2008) occurred for the political frame which seemed to persist in the lived experiences of the six district leaders interviewed. Bolman and Deal defined the political frame as tactical structure. The study's findings viewed through this lens leads to a linkage between the participants' emphasis on their preferences for autonomy to promote building and leading coalitions of stakeholders as well as their school districts effectively. The participants understood the state's authority but discussed their appreciation for gaining a sense of empowerment through the passage of HB 22 that has promoted the current accountability shift. This empowerment opportunity supports the implications explained next.

### **Implications for Practice**

The study presented the perspectives of six district leaders from three urban public school districts in Texas. The stories from the six participants developed a foundation of knowledge about the shift in the current accountability system. The participants' rich narratives lead to recommendations for practice. The significance of the study argued in Chapter 1 emerged as valid for the implications and serves as the basis for the practice-based recommendations.

First, public school superintendents guide student performance at their school districts. Considerations for shared accountability should include opportunities to further align superintendent commitment through improved relational linkages with the state education agency. Superintendents can lead the charge for improved connectedness

between school districts and the state even as they share in the responsibility for ensuring student achievement toward college and workplace readiness.

Second, this research focused on the lived experiences the participants regarding shared accountability. Given that only the top district leaders were interviewed, other aspects of the interactivity were not investigated; nonetheless, a critical implication applies to the state education agency which was not included in the study. As the interdependent relationship between superintendents and state impacts the evolving development of practice, state-level education leaders might seek out opportunities to spend time observing in vivo actions by school district leaders as they design local assessments, build capacity, and promote a vision of college and career readiness for all students. The participants in this study were involved urban district leaders with minimal and occasional interface with the state, but their data suggest the need for ongoing, open communication opportunities.

Third, given the sample representing only one type of school district, leaders of other types of school districts may be encouraged and able to learn from their urban counterparts. In turn urban school district leaders could seek out their peers who guide smaller and larger school districts to promote shared accountability as a valid educational practice.

This study contributes to knowledge on how district leaders experience and understand the shift in the accountability system. The findings emerged from the context of the responses made by the six district leaders interviewed for this investigation. Transferability of this information can be examined by considering the detailed

descriptions specific to the participants' situations and school district settings. This study has initiated a research discourse regarding state and local control.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The study's findings lead to recommendations for further investigation into the relationship and connectivity between state and local public school districts. Additional methodologies and expanded sample sizes are recommended for researchers investigating state and local shifts in accountability during the ESSA (2015) era. This research produced findings that encourage further investigation.

This phenomenological study offered an initial view surrounding the emergence of a new accountability era in the United States, specifically how district leaders experience and understand the shift in the accountability system. This research provides a foundation for further investigating the linkages existing between federal, state and local educational entities as we shift greater accountability to the state and local school districts. First, conducting a policy analysis across and within these domains in the educational system through systemic analysis may shed light on the interactivity between state and local school districts that has yet to be highlighted. Policy analysis as a form of research could inform policy makers, legislators, and other leaders about the design of shared accountability and strengthen its effectiveness as a source of alignment between public schools and higher education for the benefit of the global economy.

Second, expanding the target population in a replication study to include a more diverse superintendent demographic representing a cross-section of types of school districts may efficiently expand knowledge regarding shared accountability. Urban

school districts were the target population due to the high likelihood that they had been among the first district leaders to experience any shifts in the accountability system. The research findings support interaction between state and local district leaders, but the lived experiences of non-urban school leaders were missing from the data. A larger sample of superintendents and school district types may enable greater depth of consideration about the sustainable capacity of shared accountability in the ESSA era.

Third, comparing and contrasting how the state education agency and local school districts interpret their roles in shared accountability may be used to create capacity for sustainable local accountability. For example, how does the state react or what happens when district leaders request greater accountability autonomy while navigating developing human, collective, or resource capacity in their school districts. The participants voiced hope for gaining greater autonomy in developing their own measures as part of shared accountability with the state. The question arises how the state evaluates local school district capacity to create viable measures of student performance. There exist multidimensional variables that impact the interpretation and implementation of educational policy through the multiple levels at the federal, state, local school district, and ultimately the teacher's interpretation in the classroom.

Fourth, investigating how superintendents develop systemic capacity, provide quality resources, and effectively guide their school districts through shifts in school accountability from a grounded theory perspective could validate further Lasky's conceptual framework and generate opportunities for its application in educational practice. Lasky's framework recognizes that superintendents navigate multiple channels

and stakeholders in their school districts and manage the flow of resources and communication across their school districts and throughout their communities. The final recommendation for study involves the need for examining how resources and communication are used to leverage high student performance sustainability that could enable teacher preparation programs to better prepare preservice students who enter the field with realistic expectations and sustained enthusiasm.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study explored how district leaders experience and understand the shift towards local and shared accountability system. The intent was to discover how district leaders describe their interactivity with the state. The six participants shared their narratives about interactions between district and state education leaders. As a public school district administrator, the researcher found the perspectives shared by the participants to resonate with current practices in the field. It was reassuring to hear similar concerns about clarity with the recent implementation of the A-F accountability framework created by the TEA (2018) in addressing federal ESSA (2015) requirements.

One surprise involved the participants appeal to gain greater autonomy in the local school district level for selecting assessment criteria. As a school district administrator, the researcher is aware that establishing local accountability criteria and valid and reliable assessments to accurately measure learning and academic growth requires ample human capital and fiscal resources. However, the participants' optimism

was evident in the quest to create and apply innovative measures that would be more congruent with enabling students to obtain college and workforce readiness.

Essentially, the findings offer researchers, educators, and school leaders a pragmatic understanding of six district leaders' perspectives on the current shift in school accountability. This chapter compiled the connections between the findings and aspects of the literature, practitioner based implications, and recommendations for future research. This research study created deeper insight into how superintendents and districts' experience and understand student accountability today. This study is a first step to better understanding of the connectivity in accountability between state agencies and local school districts in the public education system.

## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Waiver of Consent Script

Thank you for agreeing to speak to me regarding your possible participation in my research study. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of the study is to explore and understand district leader perspectives about school accountability in Texas based on the state's recent shifts toward a shared accountability system. Following one 60-minute individual interview, and the sharing of this transcript with you for your review for credibility, your participation will be complete.

The research study will include:

- A 60-minute individual interview with you to gain your perspective about the state's recent shifts toward a shared accountability system;
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Soon after the interview completion, I will send you a copy of the transcript for you to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and edit by adding clarity to any points that you wish.
- All data collected will occur in a private setting to ensure interview privacy and confidentiality based on convenience for you, the participant.
- You will not be identified or identifiable in any reports of this research. For the analysis phase, you will be assigned a code identifier, which will be removed in the final document. Pseudonyms will be used to mask participants' and districts' identities. Therefore, you and your district will not be identified or identifiable.
- All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be kept in a secure location during the study and destroyed after the mandated period for record-keeping. Only researchers associated with this project will have access.
- There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

The results will be published to enable superintendents and school administrators the benefit of your experience, knowledge, and expertise regarding your perspectives in the shift between state and the school district's shared accountability with the Texas Education Agency. You may benefit from participation in this research through your personal reflection on your experience with school accountability and from the recommendations that emerge from the results of the study.

Please be aware that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time. Your decision about whether or not to participate will not affect any relationship with the University of Texas at Austin or with the school district. Should you elect not to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please e-mail me at [raulpena@utexas.edu](mailto:raulpena@utexas.edu), or my dissertation supervisor, Norma V. Cantu at [metrocan2@aol.com](mailto:metrocan2@aol.com). Any questions about the research can also be directed to the University of Texas at Austin's Office of Research Support at [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

Participant's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The information gathered from this interview will be used as part of a doctoral dissertation for the University of Texas at Austin. I will be recording the interview so that the data will be accurate. You may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any point in the interview. I'm going to ask you a set of questions about your perspectives about school accountability in Texas based on the state's recent shifts toward a shared accountability system. When I ask you to questions from your experience, think of accountability with respect to the district. The entire interview will last approximately an hour. Do you have any questions? (Answer any questions.)

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Research Question 1: What are the perspectives of district leaders regarding the shift from a state imposed accountability system to shared accountability in Texas? Interview Prompts for this research question:**

Prompt 1. As you look back on accountability since NCLB, how has its implementation and evolution by the state affected your district?

Prompt 2. What do you know about ESSA and its impact on the shift in the accountability system in Texas towards shared accountability?

Prompt 3. What do you know about today's school accountability issues and what do you propose if you could change it?

### **Research Question 2. How would district leaders of urban districts define the movement toward local control? Interview Prompts for this research question:**

Prompt 1. How long have you been in your role in the district?

Prompt 2. What is your belief about how the state measures learning and reports accountability of school districts?

- Prompt 3. What are your beliefs on the recent approval of HB 22 on the accountability system in Texas that allows for a shift toward local control in shared accountability?
- Prompt 4. What role should the state have in measuring learning and shared accountability for school districts?
- Prompt 5. What role should superintendents have in developing measures for learning and shared accountability in their school district?
- Prompt 6. What level of control should Superintendents have in establishing and overseeing production of these measures?

**Research Question 3. How do school leaders envision a plan of action for shared accountability? Interview Prompts for this research question:**

- Prompt 1. If you were in charge of accountability measurement in Texas or for your school district what process or plan would you put in place?
- Prompt 2. How would you measure what you include in this accountability plan?
- Prompt 3. How would you know if the measures you're using are valid indicators of student learning and progress?
- Prompt 4. How should superintendents show the level of progress for student learning and shared accountability in each school?
- Prompt 5. What is needed to ensure that superintendents are successful in measuring learning and leading the process of shared accountability?
- Prompt 6. What effect do you believe a shift toward letting school districts assign accountability measures would have with how you relate to your school district stakeholders and community members?

**Conclusion of Interview**

I will be using a pseudonym for you when I write up the transcripts for the interview. I will listen to your interview and write up the transcripts. Once this is completed, I will send the transcript to your email address and ask that you read it over. I will also ask for your response to a few reflection questions about reading the transcripts, such as:

- 1. Does the transcription attached accurately reflect your experience with the district wide shared accountability plan?
- 2. Is there anything you want to add or clarify about your experience with the school accountability as a result of this review?

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